David Graeber's Anarchist Thought: A Survey

Kevin Carson

Center for a Stateless Society

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Introduction: The Primacy of Everyday Life

David Graeber chose, as the epigraph to his book *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, a quote from Pyotr Kropotkin's article on Anarchism for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In it Kropotkin stated that, in an anarchist society, harmony would be

> obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free arrangements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.[1]

The interesting thing about this is that it could serve as an accurate description of virtually any anarchist society, including the libertarian communist sort favored by Kropotkin, Goldman or Malatesta, the kind of anarcho-syndicalism favored by most of the Wobblies and CNT, the anarcho-collectivism of Bakunin, the mutualism of Proudhon, or the market anarchism of Thomas Hodgskin and Benjamin Tucker. And it's appropriate that Graeber chose it as his epigraph, because his affection for “freely constituted groups” and the “free arrangements” concluded between them is bigger than any doctrinaire attempt to pigeonhole such groups and arrangements as business firms operating in the cash nexus or moneyless collectives.

Graeber, as we already saw to be the case with Elinor Ostrom, is characterized above all by a faith in human creativity and agency, and an unwillingness to let *a priori* theoretical formulations either preempt either his perceptions of the particularity and "is-ness" of history, or to interfere with the ability of ordinary, face-to-face groupings of people on the spot to develop workable arrangements—whatever they may be—among themselves. Graeber is one of those anarchist (or anarchist-ish) thinkers who, despite possibly identifying with a particular hyphenated variant of anarchism, have an affection for the variety and particularity of self-organized, human-scale institutions that goes beyond ideological label. These people, likewise, see the relationships between individual human beings in ways that can't be reduced to simple abstractions like the cash

1 David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), p. 1.

nexus or doctrinaire socialism.[2]

> If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life and, by extension, human life, it seems to me that we must start... with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all. Anthropology has shown us just how different and numerous are the ways in which humans have been known to organize themselves. But it also reveals some remarkable commonalities....[3]

Graeber's anarchism is, above all else, human-centered. It entails a high regard for human agency and reasonableness. Rather than fitting actual human beings into some idealized anarchist paradigm, he displays an openness to—and celebration of—whatever humans may actually do in exercising that agency and reasonableness. Anarchy isn't what people will do “after the Revolution,” when some sort of “New Anarchist Man” has emerged who can be trusted with autonomy; it's what they do right now. “Anarchists are simply people who believe human beings are capable of behaving in a reasonable fashion without having to be forced to.”[4]

At their very simplest, anarchist beliefs turn on to two elementary assumptions. The first is that human beings are, under ordinary circumstances, about as reasonable and decent as they are allowed to be, and can organize themselves and their communities without needing to be told how. The second is that power corrupts. Most of all, anarchism is just a matter of having the courage to take the simple principles of common decency that we all live by, and to follow them through to their logical conclusions. Odd though this may seem, in most important ways you are probably already an anarchist — you just don’t realize it.

Let’s start by taking a few examples from everyday life.

- If there’s a line to get on a crowded bus, do you wait your turn and

2 I selected James Scott and Elinor Ostrom for earlier C4SS research papers based on this quality. I expect to continue with papers on Voltairine DeCleyre, Pyotr Kropotkin and Colin Ward who, despite identifying as libertarian communists, cannot be reduced to any ideological pigeonhole based on that label.

3 Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2011), p. 89.

4 Graeber. “Are You an Anarchist? The Answer May Surprise You” (Anarchist Library, 2000) <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-are-you-an-anarchist-the-answer-may-surprise-you>.

refrain from elbowing your way past others even in the absence of police?

If you answered “yes”, then you are used to acting like an anarchist! The most basic anarchist principle is self-organization: the assumption that human beings do not need to be threatened with prosecution in order to be able to come to reasonable understandings with each other, or to treat each other with dignity and respect.…

To cut a long story short: anarchists believe that for the most part it is power itself, and the effects of power, that make people stupid and irresponsible.

- Are you a member of a club or sports team or any other voluntary organization where decisions are not imposed by one leader but made on the basis of general consent?

If you answered “yes”, then you belong to an organization which works on anarchist principles! Another basic anarchist principle is voluntary association. This is simply a matter of applying democratic principles to ordinary life. The only difference is that anarchists believe it should be possible to have a society in which everything could be organized along these lines, all groups based on the free consent of their members, and therefore, that all top-down, military styles of organization like armies or bureaucracies or large corporations, based on chains of command, would no longer be necessary. Perhaps you don’t believe that would be possible. Perhaps you do. But every time you reach an agreement by consensus, rather than threats, every time you make a voluntary arrangement with another person, come to an understanding, or reach a compromise by taking due consideration of the other person’s particular situation or needs, you are being an anarchist — even if you don’t realize it.

Anarchism is just the way people act when they are free to do as they choose, and when they deal with others who are equally free — and therefore aware of the responsibility to others that entails.[5]

Graeber's approach to the form of a hypothetical anarchist society is simple: take away all forms of domination, or of unilateral, unaccountable authority by some people over others, put people together, and see what

5 *Ibid.*

they come up with.

As we shall see below, Graeber critiques totalizing and idealized visions of the state. Similarly, anarchy itself, rather than a totalizing system, is just a way people interact with one another, and that (as Colin Ward...) it's all around us right now.

> We could start with a kind of sociology of micro-utopias, the counterpart of a parallel typology of forms of alienation, alienated and nonalienated forms of action... The moment we stop insisting on viewing all forms of action only by their function in reproducing larger, total, forms of inequality of power, we will also be able to see that anarchist social relations and non-alienated forms of action are all around us. And this is critical because it already shows that anarchism is, already, and has always been, one of the main bases for human interaction. We self-organize and engage in mutual aid all the time. We always have.[6]

Graeber's definition of "Anarchy," accordingly, is quite simple. It's whatever people decide to do, whatever arrangements out the countless ones possible they make among themselves, when they're not threatened with violence:

> ...a political movement that aims to bring about a genuinely free society—and that defines a "free society" as one where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence. History has shown that vast inequalities of wealth, institutions like slavery, debt peonage, or wage labor, can only exist if backed up by armies, prisons, and police. Even deeper structural inequalities like racism and sexism are ultimately based on the (more subtle and insidious) threat of force. Anarchists thus envision a world based on equality and solidarity, in which human beings would be free to associate with one another to pursue any endless variety of visions, projects, and conceptions of what they find valuable in life. When people ask me what sorts of organization could exist in an anarchist society, I always answer: any form of organization one can imagine, and probably many we presently can't, with only one proviso—they would be limited to ones that could exist without anyone having the ability, at any point, to call

6 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

> on armed men to show up and say "I don't care what you have to say about this; shut up and do what you're told."[7]

Graeber considers himself “a small-a anarchist,” on the side of whatever particular social forms free, mutually consenting people work out for themselves when out from under the thumb of authority.

> I’m less interested in figuring out what sort of anarchist I am than in working in broad coalitions that operate in accord with anarchist principles: movements that are not trying to work through or become governments; movements uninterested in assuming the role of de facto government institutions like trade organizations or capitalist firms; groups that focus on making our relations with each other a model of the world we wish to create. In other words, people working toward truly free societies. After all, it’s hard to figure out exactly what kind of anarchism makes the most sense when so many questions can only be answered further down the road. Would there be a role for markets in a truly free society? How could we know? I myself am confident, based on history, that even if we did try to maintain a market economy in such a free society— that is, one in which there would be no state to enforce contracts, so that agreements came to be based only on trust—economic relations would rapidly morph into something libertarians would find completely unrecognizable, and would soon not resemble anything we are used to thinking of as a “market” at all. I certainly can’t imagine anyone agreeing to work for wages if they have any other options. But who knows, maybe I’m wrong. I am less interested in working out what the detailed architecture of what a free society would be like than in creating the conditions that would enable us to find out.[8]
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> Myself, I am less interested in deciding what sort of economic system we should have in a free society than in creating the means by which people can make such decisions for themselves.[9]

7 Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (Spiegel & Grau, 2013), pp. 187-188.
8 *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.
9 Graeber, “A Pracitcal Utopians's Guide to the Coming Collapse,” *The Baffler* 23 (2013) <http://www.thebaffler.com/past/practical_utopians_guide>.

It's highly unlikely this would turn out to resemble any particular monolithic hyphenated model of anarchism, like anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-communism, or any other schematized vision of society. It would be much more likely to include a blend of all sort of things, most of which already probably exist in nascent form today all around us. In addition to gift and sharing economies, peer-production, etc., it might very well include significant elements of market exchange—although Graeber is highly skeptical that anything remotely resembling "anarcho-capitalism" could come about or be sustained entirely through voluntary agreement.

> Even what now seem like major screaming ideological divides are likely to sort themselves easily enough in practice. I used to frequent Internet newsgroups in the 1990s, which at the time were full of creatures that called themselves "anarcho-capitalists."... Most spent a good deal of their time condemning left anarchists as proponents of violence. "How can you be for a free society and be against wage labor? If I want to hire someone to pick my tomatoes, how are you going to stop me except through force?" Logically then any attempt to abolish the wage system can only be enforced by some new version of the KGB. One hears such arguments frequently. What one never hears, significantly, is anyone saying "If I want to hire myself out to pick someone else's tomatoes, how are you going to stop me except through force?" Everyone seems to imagine that in a future stateless society, they will somehow end up members of the employing class. Nobody seems to think they'll be the tomato pickers. But where, exactly, do they imagine these tomato pickers are going to come from? Here one might employ a little thought experiment: let's call it the parable of the divided island. Two groups of idealists each claim half of an island. They agree to draw the border in such a way that there are roughly equal resources on each side. One group proceeds to create an economic system where certain members have property, others have none, and those who have none have no social guarantees: they will be left to starve to death unless they seek employment on any terms the wealthy are willing to offer. The other group creates a system where everyone is guaranteed at least the basic means of existence and welcomes all comers. What possible reason would those slated to be the night watchmen, nurses, and bauxite miners on the anarcho-capitalist side of the island have to stay there? The capitalists would be bereft of their labor force in a matter of weeks. As a result, they'd be forced to patrol their own

> grounds, empty their own bedpans, and operate their own heavy machinery—that is, unless they quickly began offering their workers such an extravagantly good deal that they might as well be living in a socialist utopia after all.
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> For this and any number of other reasons, I'm sure that in practice any attempt to create a market economy without armies, police, and prisons to back it up will end up looking nothing like capitalism very quickly. In fact I strongly suspect it will soon look very little like what we are used to thinking of as a market. Obviously I could be wrong. It's possible someone will attempt this, and the results will be very different than I imagined. In which case, fine, I'll be wrong. Mainly I'm interested in creating the conditions where we can find out.[10]

(It's worth bearing in mind that the "voluntary arrangement" between Robinson Crusoe and "Friday" was possible only because Crusoe was able to claim "ownership" of the entire island with the help of a gun.)

Graeber is fairly confident in the ability of average people to work out ways of getting along in the absence of authority. The cases in which the collapse of a state results in a Hobbesian "war of all against all," like Somalia, are actually a minority. The violence in Somalia resulted mainly from the fact that the state collapsed in the middle of a preexisting war between major warlords, who continued to fight after the state collapsed.[11]

> But in most cases, as I myself observed in parts of rural Madagascar, very little happens. Obviously, statistics are unavailable, since the absence of states generally also means the absence of anyone gathering statistics. However, I've talked to many anthropologists and others who've been in such places and their accounts are surprisingly similar. The police disappear, people stop paying taxes, otherwise they pretty much carry on as they had before. Certainly they do not break into a Hobbesian "war of all against all."
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> As a result, we almost never hear about such places at all....
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> So the real question we have to ask becomes: what is it about the experience of living under a state, that is, in a society where rules are

10 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. 296-297.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

> enforced by the threat of prisons and police, and all the forms of inequality and alienation that makes possible, that makes it seem obvious to us that people, under such conditions, would behave in a way that it turns out they don't actually behave?
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> The anarchist answer is simple. If you treat people like children, they will tend to act like children. The only successful method anyone has ever devised to encourage others to act like adults is to treat them as if they already are. It's not infallible. Nothing is. But no other approach has any real chance of success. And the historical experience of what actually does happen in crisis situations demonstrates that even those who have not grown up in a culture of participatory democracy, if you take away their guns or ability to call their lawyers, can suddenly become extremely reasonable. This is all that anarchists are really proposing to do.[12]

So anarchism isn't just a grand theory that was invented by some big-league thinker, like Marx in the London Museum. It's what people actually do.

> The basic principles of anarchism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid—referred to forms of human behavior they [the so-called "founding figures" of 19th century anarchist thought] assumed to have been around about as long as humanity.[13]

I. Everyday Democracy

Graeber's respect for the capacity of ordinary people to achieve their goals through voluntary cooperation is reflected in his view of democracy, not as something the human race suffered in ignorance for millennia waiting for some smart guys in the Athenian *agora*, French Enlightenment or Philadelphia State House to come up with, but something that people have instinctively done throughout history when they meet each others as equals.

He points to the "wave of indignant responses in conservative web pages" when Western academic intellectuals' claims that the Greeks, British, colonial Americans or some other branch of "Western Civilization," are met

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

13 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, p. 3.

by Amartya Sen making “the obvious point that democracy can just as easily be found in village councils in southern Africa, or India.”[14]

> In this sense democracy is as old as history, as human intelligence itself. No one could possibly own it. I suppose... one could argue it emerged the moment hominids ceased merely trying to bully one another and developed the communication skills to work out a common problem collectively. But such speculation is idle; the point is that democratic assemblies can be attested in all times and places, from Balinese seka to Bolivian ayllu, employing an endless variety of formal procedures, and will always crop up wherever a large group of people sat down together to make a collective decision on the principle that all taking part should have an equal say.[15]

In other words, he sees institutions for self-governance and decision-making in general much as Elinor Ostrom saw institutions for governing common pool resources: not as something created by “great men” or duly constituted authorities and institutions, but by ordinary people who sat down together and started talking.

So for Graeber, democracy is something that emerges “when one has a diverse collection of participants, drawn from very different traditions, with an urgent need to improvise some means to regulate their common affairs, free of a preexisting overarching authority.”

And from such conditions it has frequently so emerged throughout human history, improvised by human beings in stations of life far more varied than the well-to-do Athenians who had endless time to kill in the *agora*, or the propertied elites who assembled in Philadelphia to represent the interests of Continental war bond speculators and land barons. Historical examples of actual democracy included, for example, the democracy of pirate ships:

> Pirates were generally mutineers, sailors often originally pressed into service against their will in port towns across the Atlantic, who had mutinied against tyrannical captains and “declared war against the whole world.” They often became classic social bandits, wreaking vengeance against captains who abused their crews, and releasing or even rewarding those against whom they found no complaints. The

14 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, p. 183.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

> makeup of crews was often extraordinarily heterogeneous. According to Marcus Rediker's book *Villains of All Nations*, "Black Sam Bellamy's crew of 1717 was a Mix'd Multitude of all Country's, including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native American, African American, and two dozen Africans who had been liberated from a slave ship." In other words, we are dealing with a collection of people in which there was likely to be at least some firsthand knowledge of a very wide range of directly democratic institutions, ranging from Swedish *things* (councils) to African village assemblies to Native American federal structures, suddenly finding themselves forced to improvise some mode of self-government in the complete absence of any state. It was the perfect intercultural space of experiment. There was likely to be no more conducive ground for the development of New Democratic institutions anywhere in the Atlantic world at the time.[16]

The frontier settlements of North America, whose inhabitants also had little in common with the classically educated delegates to the Philadelphia Convention, improvised democratic forms of self-governance much like the pirates.

> ...those early colonies were far more similar to pirate ships than we are given to imagine. Frontier communities might not have been as densely populated as pirate ships, or in as immediate need of constant cooperation, but they were spaces of intercultural improvisation, and, like the pirate ships, largely outside the purview of any states. It's only recently that historians have begun to document just how thoroughly entangled the societies of settlers and natives were in those early days, with settlers adopting Indian crops, clothes, medicines, customs, and styles of warfare. They engaged in trading, often living side by side, sometimes intermarrying, while others lived for years as captives in Indian communities before returning to their homes having learned native languages, habits, and mores. Most of all, historians have noted the endless fears among the leaders of colonial communities and military units that their subordinates were—in the same way that they had taken up the use of tomahawks, wampum, and canoes—beginning to absorb Indian attitudes of equality and individual liberty.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

> In the 1690s, at the same time as the famous Boston Calvinist minister Cotton Mather was inveighing against pirates as a blaspheming scourge of mankind, he was also complaining that his fellow settlers, led astray by the ease of the climate in the New World and relaxed attitudes of its native inhabitants, had begun to undergo what he called “Indianization”—refusing to apply corporal punishment to their children, and thus undermining the principles of discipline, hierarchy, and formality that should govern relations between masters and servants, men and women, or young and old...
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> What was true in towns like Boston was all the more true on the frontiers, especially in those communities often made up of escaped slaves and servants who “became Indians” outside the control of colonial governments entirely, or island enclaves of what historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have called “the Atlantic proletariat,” the motley collection of freedmen, sailors, ship’s whores, renegades, Antinomians, and rebels who developed in the port cities of the North Atlantic world before the emergence of modern racism, and from whom much of the democratic impulse of the American—and other—revolutions seems to have rst emerged. Men like Mather would have agreed with that as well: he often wrote that Indian attacks on frontier settlements were God’s punishment on such folk for abandoning their rightful masters and living like Indians themselves.
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> If the history were truly written, it seems to me that the real origin of the democratic spirit—and most likely, many democratic institutions—lies precisely in those spaces of improvisation just outside the control of governments and organized churches.[17]

New World colonial elites' hatred and fear of the “wildness” of frontier communities, when we read between the lines, centered very much on their illegibility. “We don't know what they're up to.”

There is a strong parallel between the spontaneous origins of democracy on pirate ships and in frontier communities, and Kropotkin's account in *The State* of the rise of the towns of Europe in the late Middle Ages. The towns started out as marginal, ungovernable areas on the frontiers of feudal control, settled from refugees from the feudal system of power. The typical

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 179-182.

late Medieval town began as a large village on an important crossroads or ford, or a fair, which became swollen with populations of runaway peasants and eventually erected walls and declared their independence from the nominal feudal overlord of the area. The solidaritarian institutions of these newly risen towns showed close continuity with the institutions of the villages they grew from, or of the peasants who fled to them; their charters of self-government, in defiance of local feudal authorities, amounted to desperate pledges of "life, fortunes and sacred honor." And the governance institutions of federated guilds displayed a communal and egalitarian ethos much like those of the village, with its open field system and non-state governance.

But the conventional Western tradition sees "democracy" as a privileged concept properly applicable only to Periclean Athens, England in 1688 and Philadelphia in 1787.

> Of course it's the peculiar bias of Western historiography that this is the only sort of democracy that is seen to count as "democracy" at all. We are usually told that democracy originated in ancient Athens—like science, or philosophy, it was a Greek invention. It's never entirely clear what this is supposed to mean. Are we supposed to believe that before the Athenians, it never really occurred to anyone, anywhere, to gather all the members of their community in order to make joint decisions in a way that gave everyone equal say? That would be ridiculous. Clearly there have been plenty of egalitarian societies in history— many far more egalitarian than Athens, many that must have existed before 500 BCE—and obviously, they must have had some kind of procedure for coming to decisions for matters of collective importance. Yet somehow, it is always assumed that these procedures, whatever they might have been, could not have been, properly speaking, "democratic."[18]
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> The real reason for the unwillingness of most scholars to see a Sulawezi or Tallensi village council as "democratic"—well, aside from simple racism, the reluctance to admit anyone Westerners slaughtered with such relative impunity were quite on the level as Pericles—is that they do not vote. Now, admittedly, this is an interesting fact. Why not? If we accept the idea that a show of hands, or having everyone who supports a proposition stand on one side of the plaza and everyone

18 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, p. 87.

against stand on the other, are not really such incredibly sophisticated ideas that they never would have occurred to anyone until some ancient genius “invented” them, then why are they so rarely employed? Again, we seem to have an example of explicit rejection. Over and over, across the world, from Australia to Siberia, egalitarian communities have preferred some variation on consensus process. Why?

The explanation I would propose is this: it is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it. Consensus decision-making is typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision—either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making. If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose. Voting would be the most likely means to guarantee humiliations, resentments, hatreds, in the end, the destruction of communities. What is seen as an elaborate and difficult process of finding consensus is, in fact, a long process of making sure no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored.

Majority democracy, we might say, can only emerge when two factors coincide:

1. a feeling that people should have equal say in making group decisions, and
2. a coercive apparatus capable of enforcing those decisions.

For most of human history, it has been extremely unusual to have both at the same time. Where egalitarian societies exist, it is also usually considered wrong to impose systematic coercion. Where a machinery of coercion did exist, it did not even occur to those wielding it that they were enforcing any sort of popular will.[19]

In the cases where formally majoritarian institutions did emerge within preexisting coercive states (as with the Western liberal democracies of the

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

past two centuries), it has generally been a case in which dissenting elements in a ruling elite defended their own rights against the ruler in terms that sounded more generally applicable than they were actually intended to be (Magna Carta), or used democratic rhetoric to enlist a popular majority as allies in its struggle for dominance—as Emmanuel Goldstein put it in *1984,* the middle enlisting the low as allies against the high. And when formally majoritarian institutions have been put in place, in practice the systems continued to be governed by the Iron Law of Oligarchy and the use of all the techniques Edward Bernays elaborated for "manufacturing consent."

> ...It's for this reason the new global movement has begun by reinventing the very meaning of democracy. To do so ultimately means, once again, coming to terms with the fact that "we"—whether as "the West" (whatever that means), as the "modern world," or anything else—are not really as special as we like to think we are; that we're not the only people ever to have practiced democracy; that in fact, rather than disseminating democracy around the world, "Western" governments have been spending at least as much time inserting themselves into the lives of people who have been practicing democracy for thousands of years, and in one way or another, telling them to cut it out.[20]

Graeber contrasts ruling class notions of "rationality" (which they naturally possess much more of than the ruled) with "reasonableness," which is "the ability to compare and coordinate contrasting perspectives"—something people used to being in a position of command, like the ruling classes with their pose of superior rationality, rarely have to do.[21] The consensus-based decision-making preferred by anarchists comes from feminist praxis ("the intellectual tradition of those who have, historically, tended not to be vested with the power of command"). "Consensus is an attempt to create a politics founded on the principle of reasonableness...." It requires the ability to listen to those with different perspectives, engage in give-and-take, and find pragmatic common ground with one's equals.[22] In other words, it's the kind of thing done by ordinary people who have to work out a solution to a common problem by sitting down and talking to each other as equals—far different from the "rationality" of "crackpot realists" who are so utterly unself-critical about the real biases of their supposedly neutral and self-

20 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
21 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. 200-201.
22 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, pp. 202-203.

evident ways of doing things.

Part of the explanation for Western elites' hostility to historical manifestations of direct democracy and self-governance by ordinary people is that it both disempowers them and puts them out of a job. As Larry Gambone argues:

> Representative democracy, such as exists in Parliament and Congress, effectively isolates people. Once ever four or five years you get to have your five minutes of democracy, casting your vote for one group or another, groups over which you have zero control. Meanwhile, you have been subject to a 24-7 propaganda bombardment from the media. This onslaught works upon and bolsters your fears, anxieties and prejudices. In isolation, both at home in front of the TV and later the ballot box, you are more likely to vote against your own interests with knee-jerk fears and prejudices.
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> Direct democracy links individuals, involves them in discussion in an assembly. Issues are debated, and without the censorship and demonization indulged in by the media, people can hear other viewpoints and make their own decisions. Fence-sitters can be swayed by the assembly in a positive direction, whereas in isolation and subject to propaganda bombardment, they might support policies that work against their real interests.
>
> Direct democracy can only function in a relatively small group—no more than a few thousand people. This means a community or neighborhood assembly, and thus questions get discussed in relation to the needs and desires of that community and are not abstract debates at the provincial or national level. Positive NIMBY can take place. A possible example—no one wants a nuclear waste dump in their community, but in a national referendum they might allow one if they thought it might be put somewhere other than their region. If the vote was *by community only,* there would be no nuclear waste dumps allowed anywhere.
>
> It isn't hard to see why the dominators hate direct democracy. Their power to dominate would quickly fade. The claim that right-wingers sometimes make that direct democracy is a form of tyranny is easy to understand. It seems like tyranny to them, because they are no longer

> in control and telling us what to do. Our freedom is despotism to them. Their freedom can only rest upon our servitude.[23]

Graeber, incidentally, sees anarchy—like democracy—as a spontaneous and common sense phenomenon that emerges as a matter of course when ordinary people confront each other as equals outside the state's jurisdiction. Historically democratic practices of self-governance were most likely to grow from the same soil as anarchistic movements—especially what James Scott would call Zomian or nonstate spaces, areas outside the reach of powerful states where runaway serfs, slaves and debtors, draft evaders, and other fugitives from authority would tend to gravitate.

> In China around 400 B.C..., there was a philosophical movement that came to be known as the “School of the Tillers,” which held that both merchants and government officials were both useless parasites, and attempted to create communities of equals where the only leadership would be by example, and the economy would be democratically regulated in unclaimed territories between the major states. Apparently, the movement was created by an alliance between renegade intellectuals who fled to such free villages and the peasant intellectuals they encountered there. Their ultimate aim appears to have been to gradually draw off defectors from surrounding kingdoms and thus, eventually, cause their collapse. This kind of encouragement of mass defection is a classic anarchist strategy. Needless to say they were not ultimately successful, but their ideas had enormous influence on court philosophers of later generations.

Indirectly, they ultimately influenced the anarchistic aspects of Lao Tzu's thought.[24] Graeber himself points out that this was just a better documented than average version of what people have done all over the world when they managed to set up new communities on the margin of state authority—people like Scott's Zomians, the Cossacks, Romani and Irish Travelers, Hakim Bey's “pirate utopias,” “tri-racial isolates” in the North American back country, etc.[25]

23 Larry Gambone, “Why the Dominators Hate Direct Democracy,” *Porcupine Blog*, May 25, 2014 <http://porkupineblog.blogspot.com/2014/05/why-dominators-hate-direct-democracy.html>.
24 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. 188-189.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

II. Everyday Communism

Although the conventional economic narrative treats money exchange as a spontaneous and natural outgrowth of barter, and a society dominated by commodity production as the logical outgrowth of this, in fact this separate sphere of atomized cash nexus exchange has never existed in any human society except where it was artificially created by the state. The common pattern throughout human history, including communities where significant elements of exchange existed, was for production, exchange and consumption to be embedded in a context of social relationships, religion, love and family life. If anything, the common denominator throughout human history—even in our society, despite the capitalist state's attempt either to destroy it or harness it as an auxiliary of the cash nexus—has been what Graeber calls "the communism of everyday life." Every society in human history has been a foundation built out of this everyday communism of family, household, self-provisioning, gifting and sharing among friends and neighbors, etc., with a scaffolding of market exchange and hierarchies erected on top of it.

For Graeber, this kind of communism is the basis of everyday life in most societies, in the same sense that many anarchists like to point out that most of our lives are characterized by anarchy. He means by it the same thing by it as the classic definition conveyed: "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." Without this universal kind of communism, based on voluntary association and self-organization, both what we refer to as "capitalist" and what we refer to as "state socialist" societies simply could not sustain themselves. To a large extent, the cash nexus and hierarchical institutions are parasitic on this basic stratum of communism in which human life and culture are reproduced.

> In fact, "communism" is not some magical utopia, and neither does it have anything to do with ownership of the means of production. It is something that exists right now--that exists, to some degree, in any human society, although there has never been one in which *everything* has been organized in that way, and it would be difficult to imagine how there could be. All of us act like communists a good deal of the time.... "Communist society" ... could never exist. But all social systems, even social systems like capitalism, have been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism.[26]

26 Graeber, *Debt*, p. 95.

> ...[C]ommunism really just means any situation where people act according to this principle: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. This is, in fact, the way pretty much everyone acts if they are working together. If, for example, two people are fixing a pipe and one says "hand me the wrench," the other doesn't say "and what do I get for it?" This is true even if they happen to be employed by Bechtel or Citigroup. They apply the principles of communism because they're the only ones that really work. This is also the reason entire cities and countries revert to some form of rough-and-ready communism in the wake of natural disasters or economic collapse – markets and hierarchical chains of command become luxuries they can't afford. The more creativity is required and the more people have to improvise at a given task, the more egalitarian the resulting form of communism is likely to be. That's why even Republican computer engineers trying to develop new software ideas tend to form small democratic collectives. It's only when work becomes standardized and boring (think production lines) that becomes possible to impose more authoritarian, even fascistic forms of communism. But the fact is that even private companies are internally organized according to communist principles.[27]

Whenever we look at the nuts and bolts of "who has access to what sorts of things and under what sorts of conditions”—even among two or a few people—and see sharing, "we can say we are in the presence of a sort of communism."[28]

The domain of communism extends further in "less impersonal" communities, like medieval villages, where it is commonly accepted that anyone with enough of the basic necessities of life to spare will share some with a neighbor in distress.[29] I would add that most pre-state societies in human history, and most agrarian villages even under the state until it was actively suppressed by either Enclosure or forced collectivization, were organized around the principle of access to common pasture, wood and waste, and periodically redivided shares in the open fields; even formally landless peasants with no strips in the open fields would maintain a passable level of subsistence by erecting cottages in the common waste and foraging for berries, game and firewood in fen and wood, and keeping a

27 Graeber, “The Machinery of Hopelessness.”
28 Graeber, *Debt*, p. 95.
29 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

few pigs or geese on the common pasture.

And society—the communities actually on the spot—reverts to this baseline communism after a major disaster, with people stepping in to contribute their labor or risk their lives in the same extraordinary—yet ordinary—ways that Kropotkin described in *Mutual Aid*.[30]

But even within formally capitalist or state socialist hierarchies—corporations, state-owned facgtories, etc.—hierarchies often unofficially rely on the informal communism of those at the bottom rung working together to solve problems that are opaque to the idiots at the top (when not actually caused by them). Capitalism is just “a poor system for managing communism.”[31]

The actual efficiency of large hierarchical institutions comes from the communism of those actually engaged in the work, and contributing their efforts to the common endeavor in the manner typically ascribed to commons-based peer production. Of course this communism takes place in a larger institutional framework characterized by military chains of command. But “...top-down chains of command are not particularly efficient: they tend to promote stupidity among those on top, resentful foot-dragging among those on the bottom.”[32]

III. The Irrelevance of Standard Ideological Models

Graeber's view of the particularity and historical situatedness of human experience precludes abstracting human social relations into artificially separated spheres like, for example, the "economic man" functioning purely in the cash nexus. Much like Ostrom, Graeber sees states as simply one example of people doing stuff, one kind of patterned relationships. And the market, likewise, is just a way people relate to one another sometimes.

One of his criticisms of modern economics, as a discipline, is that

> for there even to be a discipline called "economics," a discipline that concerns itself first and foremost with how individuals see the most advantageous arrangement for the exchange of shoes for potatoes, or cloth for spears, it must assume that the exchange of such goods

30 *Ibid*., p. 96.
31 Graeber, “The Machinery of Hopelessness.”
32 Graeber, *Debt*, p. 92.

> need have nothing to do with war, passion, adventure, mystery, sex, or death. Economics assumes a division between different spheres of human behavior that, among people like the Gunwinngu and the Nambikwara, simply does not exist.... This in turn allows us to assume that life is neatly divided between the marketplace, where we do our shopping, and the "sphere of consumption," where we concern ourselves with music, feasts, and seduction.[33]

As we saw above the conventional account of the origin of money, stated in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and repeated in a thousand introductions to economics since then, is that the “cash nexus” emerges spontaneously from the human propensity to “truck and barter.” People in "primitive" societies start out by bartering necessities with one another; confronted with the problem of "double coincidence of wants," these societies first address the problem by stockpiling especially widely desired commodities to use as media of exchange, proceed to adopting rare precious metals as the primary medium of exchange, and finally issue specific quantities of previous metals denominated in monetary values.

The problem, Graeber points out, is that this account is totally ahistorical. In all historical human societies, money exchange has been been embedded in a larger social context, as one means among many others by which people meet their needs.

The story of the origin of money out of barter, from Smith onward, has been presented as a sort of parable set in a completely imaginary society (“To see that society benefits from a medium of exchange, imagine a barter economy.” “Imagine you have roosters, but you want roses.”).

> The problem is where to locate this fantasy in time and space: Are we talking about cave men, Pacific Islanders, the American frontier? One textbook, by economists Joseph Stiglitz and John Driffil, takes us to what appears to be an imaginary New England or Midwestern town...
>
> Again, this is just a make-believe land much like the present, except with money somehow plucked away. As a result it makes no sense. Who in their right mind would set up a grocery in such a place? And how would they get supplies?[34]

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
34 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

In short, it's as much a “bourgeois nursery fable” as the “original accumulation of capital” and the “Social Contract.” That's not to say barter doesn't take place, Graeber says; just that it takes place, not between villagers, but “between strangers, even enemies.”[35] Barter is used mainly for one-off transactions between people who have no common social context.[36] And, as he argues throughout *Debt*, the very kinds of currency-cased cash nexus societies that Smith theorized had evolved from barter have only existed where states have stripped human beings of all social context and reduced them to atomized individuals.

In virtually all spontaneously emerging, self-organized human communities, the typical pattern has been, as we saw at the beginning, the “communism of everyday life” with some amount of more formalized market exchange on top of it—but still embedded in the larger social context, not as an abstract “economic” sphere. At the most basic level, this might take the form of one person in a village hinting to the shoemaker that her shoes are getting worn out, shortly thereafter getting the spontaneous "gift" of a pair of shoes, and later taking the opportunity to reciprocate the gift when the shoemaker needs something she can provide—or, just as likely, filling a need for someone else to whom the shoemaker owes a favor.[37] At a more refined level, this kind of system might evolve into virtual money, with everybody running ongoing tabs with the butcher, baker and candle-stick maker, and keeping account of whatever nature of goods and services they provide for their neighbors. Periodically members of the community settle up whatever differences are left after all the debits and credits have cancelled each other out. This sounds, as a matter of fact, a lot like the mutual credit-clearing systems of Thomas Greco and E.C. Riegel. No “double coincidence of needs” ever arises.

IV. Prefigurative Politics

Considering Graeber's high regard for the results of spontaneous, self-directed human interaction, it's not surprising he played a major role in the process that led to the Occupy movement taking a horizontalist path—against the wishes of many of its would-be founders.

> When Graeber and his friends showed up on Aug. 2..., they found out that the event wasn’t, in fact, a general assembly, but a traditional

35 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
36 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
37 *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

> rally, to be followed by a short meeting and a march to Wall Street to deliver a set of predetermined demands ("A massive public-private jobs program" was one, "An end to oppression and war!" was another). In anarchist argot, the event was being run by "verticals"—top-down organizations—rather than "horizontals" such as Graeber and his friends. Sagri and Graeber felt they'd been had, and they were angry.[38]

As Graeber recalled, the movement as it had evolved to that point gave every indication of being a conventional protest that would fizzle out with little notice.

> ...[A] local anti-budget cut coalition top-heavy with NGOs, unions, and socialist groups had tried to take possession of the process and called for a "General Assembly" at Bowling Green. The title proved extremely misleading. When I arrived, I found the event had been effectively taken over by a veteran protest group called the Worker's World Party, most famous for having patched together ANSWER one of the two great anti-war coalitions, back in 2003. They had already set up their banners, megaphones, and were making speeches—after which, someone explained, they were planning on leading the 80-odd assembled people in a march past the Stock Exchange itself.[39]

But Graeber, noticing that most of the people who showed up weren't all that happy with the professional activists' self-appointed leadership ("the sort of people who actually like marching around with pre-issued signs and listening to spokesmen from somebody's central committee"[40]), wound up playing a role comparable to triggering the crystallization of a supersaturated solution around a random particle. The demonstration that was set up to be just another cookie-cutter effort of the institutional Left —"the old fashioned vertical politics of top-down coalitions, charismatic leaders, and marching around with signs"—instead emerged as a leaderless, horizontal movement.

> But as I paced about the Green, I noticed something. To adopt activist parlance: this wasn't really a crowds of verticals—that is, the sort of

38 Drake Bennet, "David Graeber, the Anti-Leader of Occupy Wall Street," *BusinessWeek*, October 26, 2011 <http://www.businessweek.com/printer/magazine/david-graeber-the-antileader-of-occupy-wall-street-10262011.html>.
39 David Graeber, "On Playing By The Rules—The Strange Success of OccupyWallStreet," Countercurrents.org, October 23, 2011 <http://www.countercurrents.org/graeber241011l.htm>.
40 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, p. 27.

people whose idea of political action is to march around with signs under the control of one or another top-down protest movement. They were mostly pretty obviously horizontals: people more sympathetic with anarchist principles of organization, non-hierarchical forms of direct democracy, and direct action. I quickly spotted at least one Wobbly, a young Korean activist I remembered from some Food Not Bomb event, some college students wearing Zapatista paraphernalia, a Spanish couple who'd been involved with the indignados in Madrid… I found my Greek friends, an American I knew from street battles in Quebec during the Summit of the Americas in 2001, now turned labor organizer in Manhattan, a Japanese activist intellectual I'd known for years… My Greek friend looked at me and I looked at her and we both instantly realized the other was thinking the same thing: "Why are we so complacent? Why is it that every time we see something like this happening, we just mutter things and go home?"—though I think the way we put it was more like, "You know something? Fuck this shit. They advertised a general assembly. Let's hold one."

So we gathered up a few obvious horizontals and formed a circle, and tried to get everyone else to join us.... We created a decision-making process (we would operate by modified consensus) broke out into working groups (outreach, action, facilitation) and then reassembled to allow each group to report its collective decisions, and set up times for new meetings of both the smaller and larger groups....

Two days later, at the Outreach meeting we were brainstorming what to put on our first flyer. Adbusters' idea had been that we focus on "one key demand." This was a brilliant idea from a marketing perspective, but from an organizing perspective, it made no sense at all. We put that one aside almost immediately. There were much more fundamental questions to be hashed out. Like: who were we? Who did want to appeal to? Who did we represent? Someone—this time I remember quite clearly it was me, but I wouldn't be surprised if a half dozen others had equally strong memories of being the first to come up with it—suggested, "well, why not call ourselves 'the 99%'? If 1% of the population have ended up with all the benefits of the last 10 years of economic growth, control the wealth, own the politicians… why not just say we're everybody else?" The Spanish couple quickly began to lay out a "We Are the 99%" pamphlet, and we started brainstorming ways to print and distribute it for free.

> Over the next few weeks a plan began to take shape.... We quickly decided that what we really wanted to do was something like had already been accomplished in Athens, Barcelona, or Madrid: occupy a public space to create a New York General Assembly, a body that could act as a model of genuine, direct democracy to contrapose to the corrupt charade presented to us as "democracy" by the US government. The Wall Street action would be a stepping-stone.[41]

It's also not surprising that Graeber sees the horizontalism of the EZLN, the Seattle movement, the Arab Spring, M15, Syntagma and Occupy not only as models for the future human society that emerges from the decline of the existing corporate-state system of power, but also sees their prefigurative politics as the way to get there.

The antiglobalization movement "has in a mere two or three years managed to transform completely the sense of historical possibilities for millions across the planet."[42]

> The very notion of direct action, with its rejection of a politics which appeals to governments to modify their behaviour, in favour of physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative—all of this emerges directly from the libertarian tradition. Anarchism is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what's new and hopeful about it.[43]

We remarked earlier on Graeber's openness to people's choices and concrete decisions. He regards anarchist society, accordingly, as an open-ended process:

> Where the democratic-centralist 'party' puts its emphasis on achieving a complete and correct theoretical analysis, demands ideological uniformity and tends to juxtapose the vision of an egalitarian future with extremely authoritarian forms of organization in the present, these openly seek diversity. Debate always focuses on particular courses of action; it's taken for granted that no one will ever convert anyone else entirely to their point of view. The motto might be, 'If you are willing to act like an anarchist now, your long-term vision is pretty

41 Graeber, "On Playing By the Rules."
42 Graeber, "The New Anarchists," *New Left Review* 13 (January-February 2002) <http://newleftreview.org/II/13/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists>.
43 *Ibid.*

> much your own business'. Which seems only sensible: none of us know how far these principles can actually take us, or what a complex society based on them would end up looking like. Their ideology, then, is immanent in the anti-authoritarian principles that underlie their practice, and one of their more explicit principles is that things should stay this way.[44]

And the horizontalist movements that have arisen since the Zapatista uprisings in Chiapas are Graeber's primary illustration of how these lessons actually have been put into practice. They

> rejected the very idea that one could find a solution by replacing one set of politicians with another. The slogan of the Argentine movement was, from the start, *que se vayan todas—get* rid of the lot of them. InsteadThe first cycle of the new global uprising— what the press still insists on referring to, increasingly ridiculously, as "the anti-globalization movement"— began with the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas and came to a head with the *asambleas barreales* of Buenos Aires, and cities throughout Argentina. There is hardly room here to tell the whole story: beginning with the Zapatistas' rejection of the idea of seizing power and their attempt instead to create a model of democratic self-organization to inspire the rest of Mexico; their initiation of an international network (People's Global Action, or PGA) which then put out the calls for days of action against the WTO (in Seattle), IMF (in Washington, Prague...) and so on; and finally, the collapse of the Argentine economy, and the overwhelming popular uprising which, again, of a new government they created a vast network of alternative institutions, starting with popular assemblies to govern each urban neighborhood (the only limitation on participation is that one cannot be employed by a political party), hundreds of occupied, worker-managed factories, a complex system of "barter" and newfangled alternative currency system to keep them in operation—in short, an endless variation on the theme of direct democracy.
>
> All of this has happened completely below the radar screen of the corporate media, which also missed the point of the great mobilizations. The organization of these actions was meant to be a living illustration of what a truly democratic world might be like, from

44 *Ibid.*

> the festive puppets to the careful organization of affinity groups and spokescouncils, all operating without a leadership structure, always based on principles of consensus-based direct democracy. It was the kind of organization which most people would have, had they simply heard it proposed, written off as a pipe-dream; but it worked, and so effectively that the police departments of city after city were completely flummoxed with how to deal with them....
>
> When protesters in Seattle chanted “this is what democracy looks like,” they meant to be taken literally.[45]

The “core principles” are the same in all the movements, from Chiapas through the post-Seattle anti-globalization movement, the Arab Spring, Wisconsin, M15, Syntagma, Occupy, and the amazing things that have been going on more recently in places from Turkey to Brazil:

> decentralization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the network model, and above all, the rejection of any idea that the end justifies the means, let alone that the business of a revolutionary is to seize state power and then begin imposing one’s vision at the point of a gun. Above all, anarchism, as an ethics of practice — the idea of building a new society “within the shell of the old” — has become the basic inspiration of the “movement of movements”..., which has from the start been less about seizing state power than about exposing, de-legitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy and participatory management within it.[46]

Graeber considers the very word "protest" to be problematic, because "it sounds like you already lost." It recognizes the existing system of power, perhaps even its necessity, and simply tries to influence its functioning. Direct action, on the other hand, treats the system of power as both illegitimate and unnecessary, and involves people organizing their lives the way they want as though the system of power weren't even there at all.

> Well the reason anarchists like direct action is because it means refusing to recognise the legitimacy of structures of power. Or even the necessity of them. Nothing annoys forces of authority more than trying to bow out of the disciplinary game entirely and saying that we

45 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, pp. 82-84.

46 Andrej Grubacic and David Graeber. "Anarchism, Or The Revolutionary Movement Of The Twenty-first Century" (2004). In *David Graeber: Collection of Essays* (The Anarchist Library. Anti-Copyright February 5, 2012), p. 10.

> could just do things on our own. Direct action is a matter of acting as if you were already free.

Graeber points to the example of Madagascar, where the state has ceased to function—in the sense of collecting taxes or enforcing the law—in many rural areas. "[E]ssentially the government had ceased to exist and the people had come up with ingenious expedients of how to deal with the fact that there was still technically a government, it was just really far away." In most cases this meant direct action—people simply solving problems on their own—coupled with the avoidance of direct confrontation with state functionaries. The people were very polite to officials, but made enforcement as difficult as possible through passive aggression, so that state functionaries learned that the path of least resistance was to play along with the charade.

V. Human Scale Alternatives: Building the Successor Society

When we look at particular human ventures in local self-organization in their particularity, and not through the prism of ideological abstractions, it strikes me that local, face-to-face arrangements—whatever mixture of market exchange, gifting and sharing, or moneyless self-sufficiency they partake of—are largely irrelevant to critiques like Mises' socialist calculation argument or the anti-market socialist claim that any form of market exchange will, through the process of winners and losers, lead to a capitalist system based on concentrated absentee capital ownership and exploited wage labor. Human experience, quite simply, is too big for such theories to adequately describe.

It's hard for me to imagine a society without at least some market pricing to enable economic calculation on a macro-scale of trade involving numerous local communities, like the long-distance distribution of minerals, microprocessors, etc. Even Bakunin saw his agro-industrial communes exchanging their surpluses with each other on some kind of market. On the other hand even calculation hawks like Mises admitted that moneyless valuation of inputs was feasible on small scales like the Robinson Crusoe scenario or a subsistence farm; and it seems to me that a village or neighborhood economic unit of several dozen people that produced most of its consumption needs on-site with intensive horticulture, micro-manufacturing and the like, would largely fall into the same category, insofar as internal allocation of production inputs and the sharing of output

could be governed by the same communist ethos as a family (although obviously some members would have to earn “foreign exchange” by selling goods or services outside, so the community could purchase locally unavailable raw materials and specialized industrial goods on the outside).

But if small-scale production technology makes localized moneyless communism feasible for a major share of consumption needs without invoking the specter of calculational chaos, it seems equally likely that a significant amount of economic activity could be governed by free markets without degenerating—as anti-market anarchists warn—into capitalism. In an anarchy without adjectives (with no central authority capable of enforcing large-scale absentee ownership of vacant land, shutting down squats or criminalizing comfortable subsistence on squatted land, or enforcing “intellectual property,” with the technological feasibility of individuals and small communities engaging in sophisticated machine production for themselves with minimal capital outlays, and with an infinite proliferation of communistic institutions for solidarity and the pooling of risks and costs outside the money economy) it seems unlikely that the central prerequisite for economic exploitation would exist. Without, that is, the concentration of expensive means of production into a few hands, or the blocking of independent access to means of production and subsistence through social power, it would be unable to close off viable alternatives to accepting wage labor on the terms offered.

It is the very face-to-face element itself—the fact that human beings at a local level are interacting directly and working out ways to deal with one another—that conditions the nature of social relations:

> just as markets, when allowed to drift entirely free from their violent origins, invariably begin to grow into something different, into networks of honor, trust, and mutual connectedness, so to does the maintenance of systems of coercion constantly do the opposite: turn the products of human cooperation, creativity, devotion, love, and trust back into numbers once again.[47]

It is the “honor, trust, and mutual connectedness” of local, face-to-face, horizontal human relations, rather than their formally “market” or “non-market” nature, that determines their real character.

47 Graeber, *Debt*, pp. 386-387.

Graeber expresses frustration at arguing for the viability of anarchism with liberals who hypothesize it as a monolithic “system” adopted through some sort of large-scale agreement to remodel an entire society at once on the same pattern, or as a society organized exactly the way it is now in terms of economic and social institutions but with the government suddenly taken away.[48]

> There is a way out, which is to accept that anarchist forms of organization would not look anything like a state. That they would involve an endless variety of communities, associations, networks, projects, on every conceivable scale, overlapping and intersecting in any way we could imagine and possibly many that we can't. Some would be quite local, others global. Perhaps all they would have in common is that none would involve anyone showing up with weapons and telling everyone else to shut up and do what they were told. And that, since anarchists are not actually trying to seize power within any national territory, the process of one system replacing the other will not take the form of some sudden revolutionary cataclysm—the storming of a Bastille, the seizing of a Winter Palace—but will necessarily be gradual, the creation of alternative forms of organization on a world scale, new forms of communication, less alienated ways of organizing life, which will, eventually, make currently existing forms of power seem stupid and beside the point. That in turn would mean that there are endless examples of viable anarchism...[49]

The attempt to achieve solutions through the state is utterly misguided. Rather, we must start from the building blocks of everyday communism around us.

> ...the last decade has seen the development of thousands of forms of mutual aid associations. They range from tiny cooperatives to vast anti-capitalist experiments, from occupied factories in Paraguay and Argentina to self-organized tea plantations and fisheries in India, from autonomous institutes in Korea to insurgent communities in Chiapas and Bolivia. These associations of landless peasants, urban squatters and neighborhood alliances spring up pretty much anywhere where state power and global capital seem to be temporarily looking the

48 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, p. 39.
49 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

> other way. They might have almost no ideological unity, many are not even aware of the others' existence, but they are all marked by a common desire to break with the logic of capital. "Economies of solidarity" exist on every continent, in at least 80 different countries. We are at the point where we can begin to conceive of these cooperatives knitting together on a global level and creating a genuine insurgent civilization.
>
> ...Becoming aware of alternatives allows us to see everything we are already doing in a new light. We realize we're already communists when working on common projects, already anarchists when we solve problems without recourse to lawyers or police, already revolutionaries when we make something genuinely new. [50]

Graeber, in treating anarchism as something that already exists with a state superimposed on it, sounds a lot like Colin Ward.

> We are already practicing communism much of the time. We are already anarchists, or at least we act like anarchists, every time we come to understandings with one another that would not require physical threats as a means of enforcement. It’s not a question of building an entirely new society whole cloth. It’s a question of building on what we are already doing, expanding the zones of freedom, until freedom becomes the ultimate organizing principle. I actually don’t think the technical aspects of coming up with how to produce and distribute manufactured objects is likely to be the great problem, though we are constantly told to believe it’s the only problem. There are many things in short supply in the world. One thing of which we have a well-nigh unlimited supply is intelligent, creative people able to come up with solutions to problems like that. The problem is not a lack of imagination. The problem is the stifling systems of debt and violence, created to ensure that those powers of imagination are not used—or not used to create anything beyond financial derivatives, new weapons systems, or new Internet platforms for the filling out of forms. This is, of course, exactly what brought so many to places like Zuccotti Park.[51]

He proposes, as a revolutionary model for anarchists, "an eggshell theory of

50 Graeber, “The Machinery of Hopelessness.”
51 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, pp. 295-296.

revolution," in which "[y]ou just hollow it out until there's nothing left and eventually it will collapse. That means an extended period of dual power, finally culminating at the point where "the forces of order refuse to shoot."[52]

VI. The Other Side: The Stupidity of Power

Graeber is in agreement with James Scott, R. A. Wilson and a wide range of other libertarian and anarchist thinkers that power makes those who wield it stupid.

> ...[W]hile people can be reasonable and considerate when they are dealing with equals, human nature is such that they cannot be trusted to do so when given power over others. Give someone such power, they will almost invariably abuse it in some way or another. [53]

More fundamentally, it is differentials of power, which enable one side to disregard communications from the other and to substitute violence for reason, that create stupidity. Power and violence eliminate the need to understand. Instead, those in power are able to force reality into an easy-to-understand schema. And because those in power can repress anyone who disobeys or fails to follow the script, they can externalize the negative consequences of irrationality on their subordinates. Power means having neither to perceive or suffer from the negative effects of one's own actions.

One benefit of power—rendering society legible, in James Scott's terminology—is that it creates a situation in which the powerful can *afford* to be stupid. You've probably heard the old joke about the drunk who looks for his car keys under the street lamp, despite having lost them somewhere else, because the light is better. The enforcement of legibility by those in power is a way of moving all the car keys under street lamps, or at least getting everybody to pretend that's where they are. (We'll have more to say in the next section about deliberately building our new society outside the street lamp's circle of illumination.)

> What I would like to argue is that situations created by violence—particularly structural violence, by which I mean forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm—invariably tend to create the kinds of willful blindness

52 Ellen Evans and Jon Moses. "Interview with David Graeber" White Review, December 7, 2011 <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-david-graeber/>.

53 Graeber, “Are You an Anarchist?”

> we normally associate with bureaucratic procedures. To put it crudely: it is not so much that bureaucratic procedures are inherently stupid, or even that they tend to produce behavior that they themselves define as stupid, but rather, that are invariably ways of managing social situations that are already stupid because they are founded on structural violence. I think this approach allows potential insights into matters that are, in fact, both interesting and important: for instance, the actual relationship between those forms of simplification typical of social theory, and those typical of administrative procedures.[54]
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> * * *
>
> Comparative analysis suggests there is a direct relation however between the level of violence employed in a bureaucratic system, and the level of absurdity it is seen to produce.[55]
>
> * * *
>
> Violence's capacity to allow arbitrary decisions, and thus to avoid the kind of debate, clarification and renegotiation typical of more egalitarian social relations, is obviously what allows its victims to see procedures created on the basis of violence as stupid or unreasonable. One might say, those relying on the fear of force are not obliged to engage in a lot of interpretative labor, and thus, generally speaking, do not.[56]

Subordinates *have* to understand the situation, because they're the ones dealing with reality.

> It's important to bear in mind that most human relations—particularly ongoing ones, whether between longstanding friends or longstanding enemies—are extremely complicated, dense with experience and meaning. Maintaining them requires a constant and often subtle work of interpretation, of endlessly imagining others' points of view. Threatening others with physical harm allows the possibility of cutting through all this. It makes possible relations of a far more schematic kind (i.e., 'cross this line and I will shoot you'). This is of course why

54 Graeber, *Beyond Power/Knowledge: an exploration of the relation of power, ignorance and stupidity* (Malinowski Memorial Lecture: Thursday 25 May 2006), pp. 4-5.
55 *Ibid.*, p. 6
56 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

> violence is so often the preferred weapon of the stupid: indeed, one might say it is one of the tragedies of human existence that this is the one form of stupidity to which it is most difficult to come up with an intelligent response.
>
> I do need to introduce one crucial qualification here. If two parties engaged in a contest of violence—say, generals commanding opposing armies—they have good reason to try to get inside each other's heads. It is really only when one side has an overwhelming advantage in their capacity to cause physical harm that they no longer need to do so. But this has very profound effects, because it means that the most characteristic effect of violence—its ability to obviate the need for interpretive labor— becomes most salient when the violence itself is least visible, in fact, where acts of spectacular physical violence are least likely to occur. These are situations of what I've referred to as structural violence, on the assumption that systematic inequalities backed up by the threat of force can be treated as forms of violence in themselves. For this reason, situations of structural violence invariably produce extreme lopsided structures of imaginative identification.[57]

There's a great scene in Patton where the general, after defeating Rommel, says "Rommel, you magnificent bastard, I read your book." The greater the equality of power, the greater the need to take each other into account. He refers to

> the process of imaginative identification as a form of knowledge, the fact that within relations of domination, it is generally the subordinates who are effectively relegated the work of understanding how the social relations in question really work. Anyone who has ever worked in a restaurant kitchen, for example, knows that if something goes terribly wrong and an angry boss appears to size things up, he is unlikely to carry out a detailed investigation, or even, to pay serious attention to the workers all scrambling to explain their version of what happened. He is much more likely to tell them all to shut up and arbitrarily impose a story that allows instant judgment: i.e., "you're the new guy, you messed up—if you do it again, you're fired." It's those who do not have the power to hire and fire who are left with the work of figuring out what actually did go wrong so as to make sure it

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

> doesn't happen again. The same thing usually happens with ongoing relations: everyone knows that servants tend to know a great deal about their employers' families, but the opposite almost never occurs.... [So] while those on the bottom of a social ladder spend a great deal of time imagining the perspectives of, and actually caring about, those on the top, it almost never happens the other way around.
>
> Whether one is dealing with masters and servants, men and women, employers and employees, rich and poor, structural inequality—what I've been calling structural violence—invariably creates highly lopsided structures of the imagination. Since I think Smith was right to observe that imagination tends to bring with it sympathy: the result is that victims of structural violence tend to care about its beneficiaries far more than those beneficiaries care about them. This might well be, after the violence itself, the single most powerful force preserving such relations.[58]

As James Scott argued, those in power try to render society legible. But more than that, they also *pretend* that it *is* legible when it is not, and act on that assumption.

> Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematization. In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae. Whether it's a matter of forms, rules, statistics, or questionnaires, it is always a matter of simplification. Usually it's not so different than the boss who walks into the kitchen to make arbitrary snap decisions as to what went wrong: in either case it is a matter of applying very simple pre-existing templates to complex and often ambiguous situations.[59]

* * *

> A former LAPD officer turned sociologist (Cooper 1991) observed that the overwhelming majority of those beaten by police turn out not to be guilty of any crime. "Cops don't beat up burglars", he observed. The reason, he explained, is simple: the one thing most guaranteed to

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
59 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

> evoke a violent reaction from police is to challenge their right to "define the situation." If what I've been saying is true this is just what we'd expect. The police truncheon is precisely the point where the state's bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schema, and its monopoly of coercive force, come together. It only makes sense then that bureaucratic violence should consist first and foremost of attacks on those who insist on alternative schemas or interpretations. At the same time, if one accepts Piaget's famous definition of mature intelligence as the ability to coordinate between multiple perspectives (or possible perspectives) one can see, here, precisely how bureaucratic power, at the moment it turns to violence, becomes literally a form of infantile stupidity.[60]

VII. Undermining Enforcement: Autonomy, Opacity and Zomianism

As we saw above, Graeber treats the experience of so-called "primitive" societies, not as material of quaint antiquarian interest to be studied as a naturalist studies ants under a microscope, but as a common treasury of human knowledge that's relevant to the issues facing "developed" societies. Accordingly, he draws close parallels between the forms of self-governance used by Third World peoples in anthropological field studies, and the forms of organization adopted by protest movements like Occupy.

Graeber points out that the consensus decision-making process in the Occupy movement and other horizontalist movements—which actually had its modern origins in the feminist and other social justice movements and was practiced by the Zapatistas, post-Seattle movement, Arab Spring, M15 and Syntagma—is much like that used in face-to-face groups of human beings throughout history.

He argues—in terms that sound a great deal like Scott's description of Zomian law—that the lack of a political state in so-called "primitive" societies reflects, not a lack of awareness that such "advanced" levels of organization are possible, but a deliberate choice to structure social organization so as to prevent them from arising. In the predominant linear framing, the state is "a more sophisticated form of organization than what had come before," and "stateless peoples, such as the Amazonian societies..., were tacitly assumed not to have attained the levels of say, the Aztecs or the Inca."

60 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

> But what if... Amazonians were not entirely unaware of what the elementary forms of state power might be like—what it would mean to allow some men to give everyone else orders which could not be questioned, since they were backed up by the threat of force—and were for that very reason determined to ensure such things never came about? What if they considered the fundamental premises of our political science morally objectionable?

Graeber compares it to the rules built into a gift economy to prevent the concentration of wealth and power.

> In gift economies there are, often, venues for enterprising individuals. But everything is arranged in such a way they could never be used as a platform for creating permanent inequalities of wealth, since self-aggrandizing types all end up competing to see who can give the most away. In Amazonian (or North American) societies, the institution of the chief played the same role on a political level: the position was so demanding, and so little rewarding, so hedged about by safeguards, that there was no way for power-hungry individuals to do much with it....
>
> By these lights these were all, in a very real sense, anarchist societies. They were founded on an explicit rejection of the logic of the state and of the market.[61]

* * *

> Anarchistic societies are no more unaware of human capacities for greed or vainglory than modern Americans are unaware of human capacities for envy, gluttony, or sloth; they would just find them equally unappealing as the basis for their civilization. In fact, they see these as moral dangers so dire they end up organizing much of their social life around containing them.[62]

Here Graeber turns the tables. To the anarchist, it's the advocate of the state who's a naïve utopian lacking in a commonsense understanding of human nature. “That would be all right on paper, if we were all angels.”

61 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, pp. 22-23.
62 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

So it follows that counterpower can not only emerge in opposition to a system of power already in existence, but can also be aimed at preventing the rise of a system of power which does not yet exist.

> In typical revolutionary discourse a “counterpower” is a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from self-governing communities to radical labor unions to popular militias. Sometimes it is also referred to as an “anti-power.” When such institutions maintain themselves in the face of the state, this is usually referred to as a “dual power” situation. By this definition most of human history is actually characterized by dual power situations, since few historical states had the means to root such institutions out, even assuming that they would have wanted to. But [this line of argument] suggests something even more radical. It suggests that counterpower, at least in the most elementary sense, actually exists where the states and markets are not even present; that in such cases, rather than being embodied in popular institutions which pose themselves against the power of lords, or kings, or plutocrats, they are embodied in institutions which ensure such types of person never come about. What it is “counter” to, then, is a potential, a latent aspect, or dialectical possibility if you prefer, within the society itself.[63]
>
> In egalitarian societies, counterpower might be said to be the predominant form of social power. It stands guard over what are seen as certain frightening possibilities within the society itself: notably against the emergence of systematic forms of political or economic dominance.[64]

Graeber's treatment of marginal cultures on the frontiers of authoritarian states, and his thoughts on autonomy and exodus, share many parallels with James Scott's work on Zomian society, non-state spaces, and other attempts by populations to make themselves illegible to their rulers.

Scott's theme in *Seeing Like a State* was “a state's attempt to make society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.”

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
64 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

> The premodern state was, in many crucial respects, partially blind; it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity. It lacked anything like a detailed “map” of its terrain and its people. It lacked, for the most part, a measure, a metric, that would allow it to “translate” what it knew into a common standard necessary for a synoptic view. As a result, its interventions were often crude and self-defeating.
>
> ....How did the state gradually get a handle on its subjects and their environment? Suddenly, processes as disparate as the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishment of cadastral surveys and population registers, the invention of freehold tenure, the standardization of language and legal discourse, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation seemed comprehensible as attempts at legibility and simplification. In each case, officials took exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, such as land tenure customs or naming customs, and created a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored....[65]

Historically, state attempts to render the population legible entailed the suppression of local forms of Hayekian distributed knowledge, like customary modes of governance, that were illegible to the state.

> How were the agents of the state to begin measuring and codifying, throughout each region of an entire kingdom, its population, their landholdings, their harvests, their wealth, the volume of commerce, and so on? ...
>
> Each undertaking... exemplified a pattern of relations between local knowledge and practices on one hand and state administrative routines on the other.... In each case, local practices of measurement and landholding were “illegible” to the state in their raw form. They exhibited a diversity and intricacy that reflected a great variety of purely local, not state, interests. That is to say, they could not be assimilated into an administrative grid without being either transformed or reduced to a convenient, if partly fictional, shorthand. The logic behind the required shorthand was provided... by the pressing material requirements of rulers: fiscal receipts, military

65 James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 2.

> manpower, and state security. In turn, this shorthand functioned... as not just a description, however inadequate. Backed by state power through records, courts, and ultimately coercion, these state fictions transformed the reality they presumed to observe, although never so thoroughly as to precisely fit the grid.[66]

With the distinction between legibility and illegibility came another distinction, that between areas where the state was able to impose conditions of legibility with relative success (state spaces), and the nonstate spaces in which its powers of monitoring and control were relatively weak. State spaces, Scott wrote in *Seeing Like a State*, are geographical regions with high-density population and high-density grain agriculture, "producing a surplus of grain... and labor which was relatively easily appropriated by the state." The conditions of nonstate spaces were just the reverse, "thereby severely limiting the possibilities for reliable state appropriation."[67]

These nonstate spaces were the subject of his next book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*. In it he illustrated the concept primarily with reference to the populations of "Zomia," the highland areas spanning the countries of Southeast Asia, which are largely outside the reach of the governments there. He suggests areas of commonality between the Zomians and people in nonstate areas around the world, upland and frontier people like the Cossacks, Highlanders and "hillbillies," nomadic peoples like the Romani and Tinkers, and runaway slave communities in inaccessible marsh regions of the American South.

States attempt to maximize the appropriability of crops and labor, designing state space so as "to guarantee the ruler a substantial and reliable surplus of manpower and grain at least cost..." This is achieved by geographical concentration of the population and the use of concentrated, high-value forms of cultivation, in order to minimize the cost of governing the area as well as the transaction costs of appropriating labor and produce.[68] State spaces tend to encompass large "core areas" of highly concentrated grain production "within a few days' march from the court center," not necessarily contiguous with the center but at least "relatively accessible to officials and soldiers from the center via trade routes or

66 *Ibid*., p. 24.
67 *Ibid*., p. 186.
68 James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 40-41.

navigable waterways."[69] Governable areas are mainly areas of high-density agricultural production linked either by flat terrain or watercourses.[70]

The nonstate space is a direct inversion of the state space: it is "state repelling"; i.e. "it represents an agro-ecological setting singularly unfavorable to manpower- and grain-amassing strategies of states. States "will hesitate to incorporate such areas, inasmuch as the return, in manpower and grain, is likely to be less than the administrative and military costs of appropriating it."

Nonstate spaces benefit from various forms of "friction" that increase the transaction costs of appropriating labor and output, and of extending the reach of the state's enforcement arm into such regions. These forms of friction include the friction of distance[71] (which amounts to a distance tax on centralized control), the friction of terrain or altitude, and the friction of seasonal weather.[72] In regard to the latter, for example, the local population might "wait for the rains, when supply lines broke down (or were easier to cut) and the garrison was faced with starvation or retreat."[73]

In Zomia, as Scott describes it:

> Virtually everything about these people's livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, ...can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm's length. Their physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility, their cropping practices, their kinship structure, their pliable ethnic identities, and their devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders effectively serve to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them.[74]

One of Graeber's primary examples of what Scott would call a nonstate space comes from Madagascar, where the western coast from the 16th through the 19th centuries was divided into several related kingdoms under a common dynasty, collectively known as the Sakalava. In the difficult, hilly terrain of northwest Madagascar there lived a people called the Tsimihety, whose name is derived from their refusal—as required by the custom of the

69 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
70 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
71 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
72 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
73 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
74 *Ibid.*, x.

surrounding kingdoms—to cut their hair in honor of a deceased monarch. Like Zomians, they organize their societies is mostly egalitarian ways, outside the administrative reach of surrounding states. And like Zomians, they rely on mobility and distance to avoid governance by any would-be authorities.[75]

> ...under the French administrators would complain that they could send delegations to arrange for labor to build a road near a Tsimihety village, negotiate the terms with apparently cooperative elders, and return with the equipment a wee later only to discover the village entirely abandoned—every single inhabitant had moved in with some relative in another part of the country.[76]

They are regarded as an ethnic group in Madagascar. But their origins lie entirely in their political project of refusing governance by the institutions to which surrounding peoples, who speak essentially the same language and share most of the same traditions, have submitted.

> The desire to live free of Sakalava domination was translated into a desire—one which came to suffuse all social institutions from village assemblies to mortuary ritual—to live in a society free of markers of hierarchy. This then became institutionalized as a way of life of a community living together, which then in turn came to be thought of as a particular “kind” of people, an ethnic group—people who also, since they tend to intermarry, come to be seen as united by common ancestry.[77]

This model of ethnogenesis—through deliberate fission and withdrawal—is Graeber says, a relatively new concept to anthropologists. But as we saw in my previous paper on James Scott, it's central to his analysis of Zomian populations.

A central feature of Graeber's thought, as we have already seen, is his general view of the continuity between “primitive” and “modern” (i.e. Western) societies, and his view of the body of knowledge of anthropology concerning the experiences of people in so-called “primitive” societies as a common heritage of humanity that's directly relevant to our own concerns in the West.

75 Graeber, *Fragments*, pp. 54-55.
76 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
77 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Scott does not explicitly develop the analogy between Zomian/nonstate spaces, and autonomist technology and liberatory technology in the West. But Graeber very much does so, relating his Zomian model of counterpower and ethnogenesis to the concept of "exodus" in Western autonomist theory. Is his analysis of the Tsimiheti and similar people "relevant to contemporary concerns?" he asks.

> Very much so, it seems to me. Autonomist thinkers in Italy have, over the last couple decades, developed a theory of what they call revolutionary "exodus." It is inspired in part by particularly Italian conditions—the broad refusal of factory work among young people, the flourishing of squats and occupied "social centers" in so many Italian cities... But in all this Italy seems to have acted as a kind of laboratory for future social movements, anticipating trends that are now beginning to happen on a global scale.
>
> The theory of exodus proposes that the most effective way of opposing capitalism and the liberal state is not through direct confrontation but by means of what Paolo Virno has called "engaged withdrawal," mass defection by those wishing to create new forms of community. One need only glance at the historical record to confirm that most successful forms of popular resistance have taken precisely this form. They have not involved challenging power head on (this usually leads to being slaughtered, or if not, turning into some—often even uglier—variant of the very thing one first challenged) but from one or another strategy of slipping away from its grasp, from flight, desertion, the founding of new communities.[78]

This is a parallel I tried to draw in my analysis of Scott, as a model for anarchists in advanced technological societies: withdrawal into "nonstate spaces" based, not on actual spatial separation or withdrawal, but on reducing legibility and governability, and creating counterpower, while remaining where we are.

The concepts of "state space" and "nonstate space," if removed from Scott's immediate spatial context and applied by way of analogy to spheres of social and economic life that are more or less amenable to state control, can be useful for us in the kinds of developed Western societies where to all appearances there are no geographical spaces beyond the control of the

78 *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

state.

State spaces in our economy are sectors which are closely allied to and legible to the state. Nonstate spaces are those which are hard to monitor and where regulations are hard to enforce. State spaces, especially, are associated with legible forms of production. In the Western economies, the economic sectors most legible to and closely allied to the state are those dominated by large corporations in oligopoly markets.

The same effects achieved through spatial distance and isolation and the high costs of physical transportation in Scott's Zomia can be achieved in our economy, without all the inconvenience, through expedients such as encryption and the use of darknets, and the dispersal of physical production into small cooperative spaces through cheap micromanufacturing technologies. Recent technological developments have drastically expanded the potential for non-spatially, non-territorially based versions of the nonstate spaces that Scott describes. People can remove themselves from state space by adopting technologies and methods of organization that make them illegible to the state, without any actual movement in space.

Anything that reduces the “EROEI” of the system, the size of the net surplus which the state is able to extract, will cause the state to shrink to a smaller equilibrium scale of activity. The more costly enforcement is and the smaller the revenues the state (and its corporate allies, as in the case of enforcing digital copyright law or suppressing shanzhai knockoffs) can obtain per unit of enforcement effort, the hollower the state capitalist or corporatist system becomes and the more areas of life it retreats from as not worth the cost of governing.

This attempt to draw a parallel between ungovernable Third World areas and ungovernable spaces in Western societies is another example of Graeber's project for “tearing down of conceptual walls” between anthropological analysis of “primitive” cultures and the analysis of political, economic and social alternatives within the “advanced” societies. The lessons of anthropology are not of purely antiquarian interest, concerning what people lived like before they became advanced enough to invent states. They're a common conceptual treasury of humanind, with lessons for *us* about what our alternatives are *here and now*—“an infinitely richer

conception of how alternative forms of revolutionary action might work."[79] Graeber goes on to cite Peter Lamborn's (aka Hakim Bey's) work on "pirate utopias" as an example of how historical case-studies of autonomous spaces provide models for secession and exodus from the system for us.[80]

He discusses, in particular, what examples from anthropology have to say about exodus and counter-institution building as alternatives to directly confronting the state.

> Most of these little utopias were even more marginal than the Vezo or Tsimihety were in Madagascar; all of them were eventually gobbled up. Which leads to the question of how to neutralize the state apparatus itself, in the absence of a politics of direct confrontation. No doubt some states and corporate elites will collapse of their own dead weight; a few already have; but it's hard to imagine a scenario in which they all will. Here, the Sakalava and BaKongo might be able to provide us some useful suggestions. What cannot be destroyed can, nonetheless, be diverted, frozen, transformed, and gradually deprived of its substance—which in the case of states, is ultimately their capacity to inspire terror. What would this mean under contemporary conditions? It's not entirely clear. Perhaps existing state apparati will gradually be reduced to window-dressing as the substance is pulled out of them from above and below: i.e., both from the growth of international institutions, and from devolution to local and regional forms of self-governance. Perhaps government by media spectacle will devolve into spectacle pure and simple (somewhat along the lines of what Paul Lafargue, Marx's West Indian son-in-law and author of *The Right to Be Lazy,* implied when he suggested that after the revolution, politicians would still be able to fulfill a useful social function in the entertainment industry). More likely it will happen in ways we cannot even anticipate. But no doubt there are ways in which it is happening already. As Neoliberal states move towards new forms of feudalism, concentrating their guns increasingly around gated communities, insurrectionary spaces open up that we don't even know about. The Merina rice farmers described in the last section understand what many would-be revolutionaries do not: that there are times when the stupidest thing one could possibly do is raise a red or black flag and issue defiant declarations. Sometimes the sensible thing is just to

79 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
80 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

> pretend nothing has changed, allow official state representatives to keep their dignity, even show up at their offices and fill out a form now and then, but otherwise, ignore them.[81]

In other words, the most cost-effective way of supplanting the state is evasion—attacking it indirectly, though its power of enforcement. Fighting within the system to change the law, as much of the establishment Left does, is a loser's game. Participating in the process requires enormous resources of funding and effort—giving the advantage to the participants with the most money and the most lobbyists and lawyers on retainer. For a tiny fraction of the cost of getting "a seat at the table" and getting a few minor changes in punctuation in regulations drafted by the regulated industries, we can instead develop technologies of evasion that make those regulations unenforceable. As Charles Johnson argues:

> If you put all your hope for social change in legal reform … then … you will find yourself outmaneuvered at every turn by those who have the deepest pockets and the best media access and the tightest connections. There is no hope for turning this system against them; because, after all, the system was made for them and the system was made by them. Reformist political campaigns inevitably turn out to suck a lot of time and money into the politics — with just about none of the reform coming out on the other end.

Far more cost-effective is "bypassing those laws and making them irrelevant to your life."[82] A law that can't be enforced is as good as no law at all. And a society where no laws can be enforced, despite the continued existence of a state claiming authority to make such laws on behalf of a given territory, is as good as an anarchist society—indeed, it is an anarchist society.

John Robb, a specialist on asymmetric warfare and networked organization, argues that to disrupt centralized, hierarchical systems, it's not necessary to take over or destroy even a significant portion of their infrastructures. It's only necessary to destroy the most vulnerable of their key nodes and render the overall system non-functional.

These vulnerable, high-value nodes are what Robb calls the *Systempunkt.*

81 *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

82 Charles Johnson, "Counter-Economic Optimism," *Rad Geek People's Daily*, Februay 7, 2009 <"bypassing those laws and making them irrelevant to your life.">.

It's a concept borrowed from German blitzkrieg doctrine. The *Schwerpunkt* was the most vulnerable point in an enemy's defenses, on which an offensive should concentrate most of its force in order to achieve a breakthrough. Once this small portion of the enemy's forces was destroyed, the rest could be bypassed and encircled without direct engagement. Likewise, according to Robb's *Systempunkt* concept, a few thousand dollars spent incapacitating several nodes in a gas or oil pipeline system can result in disruption that costs billions in economic damage from fuel shortages and spikes in prices.[83]

Actually capturing the bulk of the system's infrastructure would be enormously costly — quite possibly costing the attacker more than it cost the enemy in economic damage.

We can apply these lessons to our own movement to supplant the state. Conventional politics aims at taking over the state's policy apparatus and using it to implement one's own goals. But taking over the state through conventional politics is enormously costly.

To a certain extent, from the perspective of the plutocrats and crony capitalists who run the system, the state itself is a *Systempunkt*—if, that is, you start out with enough money to make seizing the key node a realistic possibility. A large corporation may donate a few hundred thousands to campaign funds or spend a similar amount hiring lobbyists, and in return secure billions in corporate welfare or regulatory benefits from the state.

But from our standpoint, that's out of the question. Victory in conventional politics means we have to out-compete billionaires in a bidding war to control the state, and outdo them in navigating the rules of a policy-making process that their money already controls. The odds of carrying that off are about the same as the odds of beating the house in Vegas. You have to out-compete the RIAA in influencing "intellectual property" law, ADM and Cargill in setting USDA policy, the insurance industry in setting healthcare policy—and so on, ad nauseam.

So how do anarchists deal with the state? How do we respond to state interventions, which protect its privileged corporate clients from competition by suppressing low-overhead, self-organized alternatives? How

83 John Robb, "THE SYSTEMPUNKT," *Global Guerrillas*, December 19, 2004 <http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/2004/12/the_systempunkt.html>; Robb, *Brave New War* ??

do we get the freedom to organize our lives the way we want, in the face of a government dedicated to keeping us on the corporate reservation in order to meet all our needs?

We must find some weak point besides gaining control of the state. For us, the state's *Systempunkt* is its enforcement capability. By attacking the state at its weak point, its ability to enforce its laws, we can neutralize its ability to interfere with our building the kind of society we want here and now — and we can do so at a tiny fraction of the cost of gaining power through conventional politics.

For example, conducting torrent downloads under cover of darknets, with the help of encryption and proxies, is a lot cheaper than trying to out-compete the money and lobbyists of the RIAA in influencing "intellectual property" law. The same is true of local zoning and licensing laws, which protect incumbent businesses from competition by low-overhead household microenterprises, and of attempts to enforce industrial patents against neighborhood micromanufacturers. To a large extent, similar measures — encrypted local currencies and barter systems, secure trust networks, etc. — can neutalize government's power to tax and regulate the counter-economy out of existence.

Trying to capture the state is a loser's game. But we don't have to sieze control of the state or change the laws in order to end the special privileges of big business and the rentier classes. We just have to make the law unenforceable, so we can ignore it.

Like Elinor Ostrom, Graeber analyzes states and other authoritarian institutions in terms of their practical power as one institution in a cluster of many, and not their idealized, totalizing projection of themselves.

> States have a peculiar dual character. They are at the same time forms of institutionalized raiding or extortion, and utopian projects. The first certainly reflects the way states are actually experienced, by any communities that retain some degree of autonomy; the second however is how they tend to appear in the written record.
>
> In one sense states are the "imaginary totality" par excellence, and much of the confusion entailed in theories of the state historically lies in an inability or unwillingness to recognize this. For the most part,

> states were ideas, ways of imagining social order as something one could get a grip on, models of control. This is why the first known works of social theory, whether from Persia, or China, or ancient Greece, were always framed as theories of statecraft. This has had two disastrous effects. One is to give utopianism a bad name. (The word "utopia" first calls to mind the image of an ideal city, usually, with perfect geometry—the image seems to harken back originally to the royal military camp: a geometrical space which is entirely the emanation of a single, individual will, a fantasy of total control.) All this has had dire political consequences, to say the least. The second is that we tend to assume that states, and social order, even societies, largely correspond. In other words, we have a tendency to take the most grandiose, even paranoid, claims of world-rulers seriously, assuming that whatever cosmological projects they claimed to be pursuing actually did correspond, at least roughly, to something on the ground. Whereas it is likely that in many such cases, these claims ordinarily only applied fully within a few dozen yards of the monarch in any direction, and most subjects were much more likely to see ruling elites, on a day-to-day basis, as something much along the lines of predatory raiders.
>
> An adequate theory of states would then have to begin by distinguishing in each case between the relevant ideal of rulership (which can be almost anything, a need to enforce military style discipline, the ability to provide perfect theatrical representation of gracious living which will inspire others, the need to provide the gods with endless human hearts to fend off the apocalypse...), and the mechanics of rule, without assuming that there is necessarily all that much correspondence between them.[84]

His proposed theory of the state is a project "to reanalyze the state as a relation between a utopian imaginary, and a messy reality involving strategies of flight and evasion, predatory elites, and a mechanics of regulation and control.[85]

Graeber's agenda of counter-institution building must be coupled with attacks on the central structural supports of the present system.

84 Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, pp. 65-66.
85 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

> For at least 5,000 years, before capitalism even existed, popular movements have tended to center on struggles over debt. There is a reason for this. Debt is the most efficient means ever created to make relations fundamentally based on violence and inequality seem morally upright. When this trick no longer works everything explodes, as it is now. Debt has revealed itself as the greatest weakness of the system, the point where it spirals out of control. But debt also allows endless opportunities for organizing. Some speak of a debtors' strike or debtors' cartel. Perhaps so, but at the very least we can start with a pledge against evictions. Neighborhood by neighborhood we can pledge to support each other if we are driven from our homes. This power does not solely challenge regimes of debt, it challenges the moral foundation of capitalism.[86]

The best way of attacking these structural supports, as we already considered in the case of non-state spaces, is by undermining or evading the state's enforcement machinery, and building counter-institutions in the interstices of the present system that will eventually supplant it, rather than direct confrontation. As my friend Katherine Gallagher put it:

> For me it's about stretching out our networks of what's possible across borders, about decentralizing... "We" will be transnational, and distributed. We won't be encircled by "them," but woven through their antiquated structures, impossible to quarantine off and finish. I'm not a pacifist. I'm not at all against defensive violence. That's a separate question to me of overthrow. But to oversimplify, when it comes to violence, I want it to be the last stand of a disintegrating order against an emerging order that has already done much of the hard work of building it's ideals/structures. Not violent revolutionaries sure that their society will be viable, ready to build it, but a society defending itself against masters that no longer rule it. Build the society and defend it, don't go forth with the guns and attempt to bring anarchy about in the rubble.
>
> I think technology is increasingly putting the possibility of meaningful resistance and worker independence within the realm of a meaningful future. So much of the means of our oppression is now more susceptible to being duplicated on a human scale (and so much of patent warfare seems to be aimed at preventing this).

86 Graeber, “The Machinery of Hopelessness.”

> And I think we should be working on how we plan to create a parallel industry that is not held only by those few. More and more the means to keep that industry held only by the few are held in the realm of patent law. It is no longer true that the few own the "lathe" so to speak, nearly as much as they own the patent to it. So we truly could achieve more by creating real alternative manufacture than seizing that built. Yes, there will be protective violence, but it's not as true as it was in the past that there is real necessary means of production in the hands of the few. What they control more now is access to the methods of production and try to prevent those methods being used outside of their watch. Again, I'm not saying that the "last days" of the state won't be marked by violence. But I am saying we now have real tactical options beyond confronting them directly *until* they come to us.[87]

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87 Redacted into paragraph form from a series of tweets by Katherine Gallagher (@zhinxy) in July 2012.

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