

An Homage to David Graeber and to the Transformative Power of the Imagination, by James Anderson

Published by The Institute for Anarchist Studies (IAS), September 21, 2020

In an essay he authored several years back titled, “Dead Zones of the Imagination: An Essay on Structural Stupidity,” Graeber started with an anecdote about wrestling with the medical bureaucracy to assist his mother who had suffered several strokes^[1]. She died soon after, he revealed a few pages later^[2].

That someone whose work was so influential in shaping my own ideas about the world and how to change it is now gone, yet I can still read what he wrote broaching the subject of death strikes me as significant. The assumed significance compelled me to dig deeper into that essay once again while contemplating the arguments he articulated in that piece in relation to the profound insights scattered throughout so much of his oeuvre.^[3]

Returning to his work and immersing myself in it after his death revealed just how applicable much of it is to the current conjuncture. Amid the novel coronavirus pandemic made a million times worse by global capitalism and its concomitant institutions, coupled with righteous indignation and insurrectionary mobilizations against racist police violence, Graeber’s words still resonate, perhaps now more than ever before. But in lieu of eulogizing, which others have already done so beautifully, this commemoration will proceed by way of engagement with the powerful ideas Graeber shared through his accessible, public-facing work. I draw heavily from his critique of bureaucracy and structural violence.

I also work with a theme developed throughout his work – imagination. As Graeber acknowledged, “the word ‘imagination’ can mean so many different things.”^[4] In popular parlance today, it is often taken the abstract and “counterposed to reality; ‘imaginary’ things are first and foremost things that aren’t really there.”^[5] However, he also made clear just how practical and indispensable it is in the formation of human lives worth living and in the reproduction of social relations that make our lives meaningful. Taking it further still, he alerted us to the ways society impairs the human imagination, redirecting it toward pathological aims in the service of bureaucratic systems intent on imposing unrealistic expectations bound to a simultaneously violent and stupid order. I hope to show how the power of Graeber’s imagination can still ignite our own creative capacities capable of catalyzing struggles and constructing strategies geared toward transcending a wrong world rife with hierarchical violence and stupidity.

Markets and Capitalism: Beneficiaries of Bureaucracy and Agents of Structural Violence

Let me begin with bureaucracy. Be it metaphorical piles of electronic paperwork, an explosion in administrative and managerial occupations, or the oft-labyrinthine systems of rules imposed by those with claims to the legitimate monopoly on violence that governs ever-greater facets of our lives, bureaucracy is having a moment. Graeber claimed we had entered an epoch of “total bureaucratization.”^[6]

We can also interpret the political spectrum in relation to people’s positions vis-à-vis bureaucracy. Insofar as one subscribes to the notion, dating back to around the time of the French Revolution, that the political spectrum can be divided into a left-wing and right-wing, “the Left, in its essence,” Graeber wrote, “is a critique of bureaucracy, even if it’s one that has, again and again, been forced to accommodate itself in practice to the very bureaucratic structures and mindset it originally arose to oppose.”^[7] He went on to suggest that the lack of a potent critique of bureaucracy from the Left in the last four or five decades is synonymous with the lack of a potent Left in recent years.^[8] Failure to advance a vision beyond the bureaucratic morass that has enveloped the body politic weakened the Left and spayed liberatory anti-authoritarian movements whose *raison d’être* had long been about abolishing bureaucracy in the process of birthing something new.

We can hardly separate the failure from the duplicitous celebration of markets, those institutions so deceptively yet inextricably linked to the ascendancy of bureaucracy. Graeber put forward a sociological theory he called “the iron law of liberalism,” which “states that any market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs.”^[9] Although it is not the only economic system or form of socioeconomic organization to do so, capitalism clearly tolerates and even engenders – perhaps increasingly requires – bureaucratic institutions.

This becomes all the more evident when we factor in another one of Graeber’s arguments. The argument focuses on “structural violence,” by which he meant the “forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm.”^[10] He elsewhere defined it as those existing “social hierarchies backed up by a systematic threat of force.”^[11] Whichever way you slice it, Graeber argued that structural violence produces disparities in “interpretive labor”^[12] and in capacities for “imaginative identification,”^[13] which results in a form of social stupidity managed by bureaucracy. Social arrangements of structural violence are, for Graeber, inherently stupid insofar as they generate “lopsided structures of the

imagination,” owing to the fact those empowered by the stratified arrangements do not have to engage in the interpretive work typically necessary for the maintenance of human social relations. Those ultimately able to wield or to enlist a repressive apparatus in wielding violence to maintain the conditions that benefit them (at the expense of others) need not empathize with the people systematically disempowered by those same conditions who, in contrast, must imagine what those in power want and need. Those subject to structural violence, and/or to the direct physical violence Graeber stressed as the foundation for the former, regularly work to interpret the world from the perspective of those positioned to tell them what to do. The subordinate and subaltern are obliged to empathize and envisage the world from the point of view of persons in power, lest they bear the brunt of that impending violence or suffer injurious injunctions on agency worse than the constraints on consequential human thought and action ordinarily operating in structurally violent spaces.

The connection between direct physical violence and structural violence is also, for Graeber, of the utmost importance here. As Graeber once wrote,

“Violence is veritably unique among forms of action because it is pretty much the only way one can have relatively predictable effects on others’ actions without understanding anything about them. In any other way one might wish to influence others, one has to at least know or figure out who they think they are, what they want, find objectionable, etc. Hit them over the head hard enough, it all becomes irrelevant.”^[14]

He added that relations of violence have historically characterized interactions among different existing societies.^[15] Violence simplifies social relations. When we humans have lacked complex knowledge about each other, we have resorted to such simplifications.

Interestingly, as Graeber also documented, barter (or market exchange more generally), has seldom if ever emerged from within a given society; rather, it tends to “take place between strangers, even enemies.”^[16] Drawing upon the tradition of world-systems analysis, Graeber elsewhere pointed out how many now believe capitalism “developed first in long-distance trading” before it “gradually wormed its way into ever-more-intimate aspects of communities’ daily life.”^[17] Commercial exchange cropped up to simplify social relations among parties without the requisite knowledge or affective inclination to interact in the complex ways traditionally enabled by community life.

Both violence and the market transactions required for capitalism, then, serve a similar function in terms of minimizing the importance, at least for some, of

interpretive-imaginative labor. Of course, markets – even without the wage labor and class antagonism central to capitalism – can also aggravate existing disparities and give rise to situations of structural violence. Market abolitionists like Michael Albert, whom Graeber credited with “an important achievement” for working “out a detailed plan for how a modern economy could run without money on a democratic, participatory basis,”^[18] have often pointed this out.^[19] Per Albert’s critique, while humans have different abilities to benefit and produce for each other, who can produce more or benefit others better – or market themselves, if you will, to give people that impression anyway – can demand and obtain more through market systems, though those differing abilities do not automatically bestow a moral claim for select persons to benefit more. In a similar vein, markets permit those with greater innate abilities to reap better economic rewards even if they exert less effort or make less sacrifice on the job, thereby rewarding or disadvantaging people for what can be outside their control. Further, markets reward those with greater ability to hold out and wait to reach an agreement. This puts a strong, healthy and able-bodied person without dependents at an advantage over, say, a single mother with a sick child, to borrow a common example. Markets also advantage those with greater or easier access to certain goods and materials, making mere proximity to desired resources and essentially happenstance a determining factor in who gets the best deal. Finally, the wealth conferred by those who exercise the most power within market systems in turn confers social power that extends beyond the institutions for allocating goods and services through competitive buying and selling, and that social power reinforces the structural violence resulting from the hierarchies erected by the market exchanges giving rise to that social power to begin with.

To be sure, markets are necessary for, but they are not unique to, capitalism. As Graeber pointed out, one can say capitalism exists “when profit becomes an end in itself” and capital incessantly endeavors to expand.^[20] As he also noted, one can define it based on wage labor and claim it “occurs when a significant number of firms are owned or managed by people who hire others to do their bidding in exchange for a direct payment of money, but otherwise have no stake in the enterprise.”^[21] However, Graeber argued, we can view the advent of capitalism as coeval with the systematic separation of the economic from the domestic sphere – a split that makes abstract talk of the “economy” possible.^[22]

Abolitionist and Feminist Insights Regarding Police and Bureaucracy

But back to bureaucracy and violence, both of which have thrived under capitalism as of late. And the subject of much debate as of late, policing, is an institution responsible for both, according to Graeber. He likewise connects the market ideology integral to capitalism with violence and the police. As Graeber wrote,

“Whenever someone starts talking about the ‘free market,’ it’s a good idea to look around for the man with the gun. He’s never far away. Free-market liberalism of the nineteenth century corresponded with the invention of the modern police and private detective agencies, and gradually, with the notion that those police had at least ultimate jurisdiction over virtually every aspect of urban life, from the regulation of street peddlers to noise levels at private parties, or even to the resolution of bitter fights with crazy uncles or college roommates.”^[23]

He goes on to lament how we have become so used to the notion that we *could* (and lots of people, I’d add, still believe we *should*) call the police to resolve just about any problem that “many of us find it difficult to even imagine what people would have done before this was possible.”^[24] Yet, as Graeber emphasized, for most people throughout human history, there were not authorities to call in such situations – “at least, no impersonal bureaucratic ones who were, like the modern police, empowered to impose arbitrary resolutions backed by the threat of force.”^[25] Yet we now take it for granted that police ought to intervene in circumstances they historically would have had no business intervening in, just as we have come to accept the bureaucratization of everyday life as legitimate. “Police,” Graeber wanted to remind us, “are bureaucrats with weapons.”^[26]

His historical insights are in accord with many principles of prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition, like the notion we have abdicated responsibility for each other by coming to rely on police to resolve myriad issues of social harm. Graeber also highlighted how our learned dependency on law enforcement became so naturalized. He points out that we do not usually think about policing as the enforcement of regulations, and instead assume police primarily fight violent crime. However, “what police mostly do is exactly the opposite: they bring the threat of force to bear on situations that would otherwise have nothing to do with it.”^[27] Obfuscation about that function abounds, Graeber offered, because “in the popular culture of the last fifty years or so, police have become almost obsessive objects of imaginative identification,”^[28] heroes of many a media narrative portrayed as protectors who keep us safe, not as defenders of private property with a knack for executing racist state violence.

Yet, Graeber went further. Thinking about the function of police (and bureaucracy), he wrote, allows us to look at social theory in new light. Both bureaucratic knowledge and theoretical knowledge involve radical simplifications and purposefully reductive generalizations; they frequently entail application of pre-existing paradigms. In the realm of theory, though, he insisted, “simplification is not necessarily a form of stupidity—it can be a form of intelligence,”^[29] even a source of profound elucidation. “The problems arise,” he added, “at the moment that violence is no

longer metaphorical.”^[30] Then, himself moving from the abstract to the concrete, he cited a former LAPD officer who stated the one behavior guaranteed to provoke a violent police response has to do with people calling into question an officer’s presumed right to “define the situation” and apply a preferred administrative template to maintain what passes for social order.^[31] The corporate state’s bureaucratic imperatives and its monopoly on coercion come together in a police officer’s exercise of force. “It only makes sense then,” Graeber clarified, “that bureaucratic violence should consist first and foremost of attacks on those who insist on alternative schemas or interpretations.”^[32]

In a brilliant rhetorical convergence, Graeber proceeded to illuminate the connections between the bureaucratic violence of police and the imaginative-interpretive labor deficit driving the stupidity of a structurally violent – that is, a highly and illegitimately hierarchical – society. As Graeber explained, situations of structural violence ultimately remain in place because of a real threat – and indeed, the periodic deployment – of state-sanctioned brutality. Those situations also exist because bureaucracy helps conceal the undergirding reality while administering all of the rules and regulations that keep the state and capitalism afloat. These factors give rise to those uneven imaginative capacities. Within the part of the population that sits atop many social hierarchies, the underlying structures, buoyed by bureaucracy, stifle the innately human yet also learned abilities so crucial to the collaborative self-care and reproduction of our species.

Just as Graeber’s argument echoes a philosophy of abolition – not surprising given his self-identification as an anarchist – his criticisms also echo those leveled by feminists and abolition feminists in particular, which is also not surprising given that Graeber explicitly credits feminist theory and Critical Race Theory with having already articulated many of the same ideas he espoused.^[33] He foregrounded his feminist critique in his explanation of how structural violence places the burden of interpretive labor on subordinate persons while rendering it superfluous to those in dominant institutional roles. He referenced the way institutionalized power disparities running through gender relations have historically placed the onus on women to figure out what men want, while men have chalked up their inability to understand women to the supposed fact that women are so fundamentally different and presumably impenetrable. “For example,” he wrote, “in American situation comedies of the 1950s, there was a constant staple: jokes (told, of course, by men), always represented women’s logic as fundamentally alien and incomprehensible.”^[34] The popular message on those shows would be something along the lines of the following: “You have to love them, but who can really understand how these creatures think?”^[35] In my mind, one can accept that genetically endowed biological differences influence socio-culturally manifest iniquities pertaining to sex and gender

while still acknowledging and working to overcome the historically constructed patriarchal residues that influence sexual politics and perpetuate institutionalized gendered hierarchies that subordinate women to men. As a cis-gendered straight man in my thirties, I have certainly succumbed to that way of thinking at times. In effect, then, the structures in place provided me the opportunity to subtly wield social power and avoid the interpretive labor not always available to women in similar contexts.

One of the primary reasons opting out of that interpretive labor has not been an option for many women has to do with the pillar buttressing structural violence. If you recall, Graeber adamantly underscored how direct physical violence and the threat thereof create situations amenable to structural violence. Historically, patriarchal relations survived in part because of the direct physical violence men could use to threaten and to subjugate women, especially in the domestic sphere.

If you also recall, Graeber viewed the split between the economic or productive sphere and the sphere of domestic relations as a fundamental facet of capitalism. The split reinforced patriarchal gender norms. Like abolition feminists, Graeber grasped these intersections. In relation, he also understood how the work of producing people, which takes place in the personal and domestic spheres, falls disproportionately on women. Capitalism, which privileges the production of commodities to be bought and sold on the market, devalues all the energy and effort that goes into making other people, it devalues the persons predominantly tasked with that work, and it devalues the non-economic spheres in which the extensive labor of tending to and cultivating other human beings unfolds.

Ironically, in the economic realm, employment of the imagination is not always asymmetrical. High-ranking executives or mid-level managers acting on behalf of a corporation might truly perform a decent amount of interpretive labor on occasion in order to encourage employee loyalty and commitment to a company's competitive success. The reverse can also occur, commensurate with the thesis explained above. Graeber challenged the notion that knowledge is invariably tantamount to power when structures of violence are at work (note the operative double entendre).

Imaginative identification, viewed "as a form of knowledge,"^[36] regularly gets short shrift among many employers who turn around and expect, unrealistically (not unlike the hierarchies and bureaucracies demanding obedience to rules with which humans can hardly comply), that workers tap into some psychic powers in order to appease the boss. Graeber summarized the situation as follows:

"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 ... 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 doesn't happen again.”^[37]

The class conflict baked into capitalism at the enterprise level not only precludes the practice of economic democracy that could give working people greater say over the workplace decisions that affect them. It also precludes the democratization of imaginative identification within a structurally violent system.

Death, Domination and Transcendence

Now, not to dwell on death, but Graeber provided another apropos example for feminist and anti-capitalist theory dealing with how we memorialize the departed. In fact, he argued, the phenomenon of mourning reveals some of the “essential labor of people-making”^[38] insofar as it shows how much of one's social standing stems from the work of others. In line with what we have adduced so far, societal expectations have long ensured women disproportionately engage in the under-appreciated labor of mourning. Moreover, Graeber suggested that without much of the “labor of people-making” and the values that make social reproduction possible, there would be no real source of value in the economic sphere under capitalism because without that you would not have functioning individuals capable of selling their power to work for a wage.

Interestingly, while mourners' actions recreate the conceptual separation between the earthly and divine, as Graeber indicated, capitalist society, characterized by the split between the domestic/personal and economic spheres, also supposes a transcendent realm.^[39] The economic arena – the space outside and apart from domesticity – “is usually treated as if it is to some degree transcendent, that is, as floating above and unaffected by the mundane details of human life (the special domain of women), having to do with timeless verities, eternal principles, absolute power – in a word, of something very like idealist abstractions.”^[40] Mourning, as described above, is another form of denigrated labor, performed overwhelmingly by women, “which creates and maintains that illusion of transcendence.”^[41]

The disconcerting myth of transcendence, however, appears to be more a product of capitalism's arrangements than it is a consequence of constantly co-creating human beings. Like capitalism, Graeber claimed, “all systems of domination seem to propose that,” truly “there is some pure domain of law, or truth, or grace, or theory, or finance capital, that floats above it all,” even as “such claims are, to use an

appropriately earthy metaphor, bullshit.”^[42] The bullshit flies under our radar most of the time, as does the fact capitalism benefits from the value we place on our collective co-creation while the system simultaneously masks and demeans that creative people-producing process.

Effectively, our desires, passions, commitments and other human qualia entail “processes of the mutual creation of human beings,”^[43] but economic value and associated idealist abstractions conceal our mutually constitutive processes by positing a higher sphere. The more hierarchical a society, the more that is the case.^[44] As noted before, Graeber contended that the simplifications of social theory could be incredibly useful, but he also observed, historians, social scientists (and, we could add, philosophers) routinely engage in odd simplifications about human life and people’s motivations that really miss the mark because of this presupposed transcendental sphere.^[45] The ideologies that emerge thus serve to reinforce values conducive to the constant accumulation of capital.

For his part, Graeber advanced one final thesis among several in a paper authored in the 2000s that captures the way capital, the engine driving the dastardly system, relies upon the reification of our otherwise emancipatory imagination. “Capitalism’s unlimited demand for growth and profit,” he adduced, “is related to the transcendent abstraction of the corporate form.”^[46] Extrapolating further, he went on to assert that the “dominant forms” within any society are treated as “transcendent forms,” similar to the way we regard forms of value.^[47] Troublingly, he added, “when these “transcendent forms encounter ‘material’ reality, their demands are absolute.”^[48] He did not expound upon that final claim in the essay. To my knowledge, he never had the chance to expound the claim at all. He left it for us to interpret. The best we can do is to connect the transcendent corporate forms under capitalism to relations of domination. Capitalism empowers corporations to act like what another American-born anarchist-minded thinker, Noam Chomsky, refers to as “largely unaccountable private tyrannies”^[49] detached from any meaningful input from workers directly subject to decisions in firms could offer and estranged from any significant influence the wider public impacted by business might wish to exert. We would be remiss not to similarly connect the totalizing or absolute demands made upon people by capitalist institutions and the virtually all-encompassing control exacted by bureaucracy in this era.

Coincidentally, though, Graeber’s imagination, as expressed in the form of theoretical ideas, ostensibly transcend the life of his human form, which left this world far too soon. Fittingly, the power of his imagination implores us to do the interpretive work and the imaginative identification he cited as so essential to who we are and to who we shape ourselves to become as a species. Graeber’s thought prompts us to consider

what lies beyond the dominant transcendent imaginary with regard to the possibilities of human imagination.

The Hegemony of Bureaucratic Realism

In his essay on structural violence and bureaucracy, Graeber quoted the famous slogan from the uprisings of 1968 – “Be realistic: demand the impossible.”^[50] In arguing for recuperation of the radical – albeit practical – imagination and attendant praxis to realize what so many of us automatically dismiss out of hand as impossible, he was careful to distinguish that from the utopian nature of bureaucratic systems. As he put it,

“Bureaucracies public and private appear—for whatever historical reasons—to be organized in such a way as to guarantee that a significant proportion of actors will not be able to perform the tasks as expected. It’s in this sense that I’ve said one can fairly say that bureaucracies are utopian forms of organization.”^[51]

It is here that Graeber opens up the notion of what it means to be realistic. Bureaucracies manage the stupidity stemming from dehumanizing social hierarchies by stupidly refusing to address the realities of lived human experience. This transpires to the degree bureaucracies “set demands they insist are reasonable, and then, on discovering that they are not reasonable (since a significant number of people will always be unable to perform as expected), conclude that the problem is not with the demands themselves but with the individual inadequacy of each particular human being who fails to live up to them.”^[52]

Graeber does not make this point explicit, but we can also see how an ideology of individual responsibility might gain ground, given the bureaucratic structures erected in ways that make it impossible for people to abide. That ideology, like the bureaucracy it supports, appears to, as Graeber had it, “create a culture of complicity,”^[53] a fealty to existing institutions. If Graeber is correct in stating that bureaucratic systems smack of utopianism “in the sense that they propose an abstract ideal that real human beings can never live up to,”^[54] then those systems (of structural violence) hijacked the popular imagination to such an extent that an “era of total bureaucratization” could emerge. To flip the ideological script, we could say that the individualization of social problems derives from entrenched structural violence and from the bureaucracy that manages it while holding all of us up to unrealistic ideals; that logic succeeds insofar as we fail to assume responsibility for letting it seep into nearly every crevasse of social life. Likewise, capitalism’s drive to produce, and to reduce human beings and others parts of the natural world, to commodified things, and its separation of the domestic from the economic sphere,

comports with a worldview that downplays the collective efforts directed at creating vibrant social creatures (human beings habituated to thrive).

Granted, like Graeber was at pains to show, the ideological serviceability and sustained influence of the above surely depends quite a lot on the state (and right-wing militia-style) violence waiting in the wings to pounce should direct action begin to seriously challenge prevailing institutions. For him, “the essence of right-wing thought,” amounted to “a political ontology that through such subtle means [like the euphemism of “force,” evocative of cosmic action, used in place of state-sanctioned harm] allows violence to define the very parameters of social existence and common sense.”^[55] Despite his skepticism of the present-day utility of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, referring to the cultural processes producing popular consent for a social order in ways that naturalize dominant organizational forms, Graeber remained privy to the ways human constructions, even and especially those at odds with real human flourishing, become normalized and legitimized. His writing about pop culture depictions of heroic police officers is exhibit A. However, he also remained attentive to the real ways that coercion and repression reinforce the maintenance of hegemony. Future contributions to Gramscian theory might do well to investigate that and the interplay between bureaucracy and hegemony.

We have to raise the question here, though, as to how and why people come to consent to coercion and repression. Bureaucracy seems to help. It assists in the management of stupidity, thereby inculcating unjust idiocy. It also circumscribes and redirects the imagination, especially when would-be rebellions start intimating that our imagination might take material forms. Police and agents of the prison-industrial complex are adept at imposing shackles on people’s imaginative powers, literally and figuratively. Graeber also understood that the bureaucratic and thus “profoundly alienating” institutions defining our existence “are the instruments through which the human imagination is smashed and shattered.”^[56]

Insurrectionary Upheaval and the (Transcendent?) Power of the Radical, Practical Imagination

However, he also seized upon the idea that moments of insurrection “are moments when this bureaucratic apparatus is neutralized,” which has “the effect of throwing horizons of possibility wide open,” as would be expected given the function of bureaucracy to “enforce extremely limited horizons.”^[57] Herein lies another part of the enduring relevance of Graeber’s radical imagination. Prior to his premature departure from this world, he gifted us theoretical tools for discovering what potential resides in the uprisings of the summer of 2020 – uprisings that quite clearly reflect rebellions against structural violence. Most pertinently, contestation of structural violence has come in the form of widespread mobilization against the

systemic racism and institutionalized anti-Blackness on display in the murder of people of color by the state-backed bureaucrats with guns. Secondly, the structural violence of a system that has rendered millions of people disposable during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving large swaths of the population with no jobs, income or money to pay rent, contributed to an outpouring of support for militant demonstrations.

The perennial problem we must grapple with again has to do with how the insurrectionary activity of 2020 can contribute to thoroughgoing structural transformation. As Graeber noted, the question posed by erstwhile revolutionaries had “thus been: how does one affect fundamental change in society without setting in train a process that will end with creation of some new, violent bureaucracy?”^[58] As part of a partial rejoinder to his own rhetorical question, Graeber cited another ’68 slogan, “All power to the imagination,” but he promptly raised another germane question regarding what imagination we are referencing there.^[59] On one hand, there is “the transcendent imagination” that leads to attempts “to impose some sort of prefab utopian vision”^[60] as atrocities abound. Then there is “the other, immanent sort of imagination—the practical common sense imagination of ordinary cooks, nurses, mechanics and gardeners,” which under the right circumstances might be vital if we are to avoid violent imposition of a violent bureaucratic schema under the guise of bettering humanity.^[61] As readers are likely aware, currents of insurrectionary – and, it is important to note, currents of reactionary and proto-fascist – thought operating during this period of interlocking crises believe a civil war in the US is fast approaching and, some contend, even desirable. In his work published a few years back, Graeber seemed far less sanguine about the prospects of anything good coming out of that mode of militarism. He referred to “the old assumption that a single uprising or successful civil war could, as it were, neutralize the entire apparatus of structural violence, at least within a particular national territory,” as “strikingly naïve,” given what we know about past insurgencies – even if it certainly appeared as though movements could nullify or control the apparatus during those revolutionary moments.^[62]

One way to resolve the dilemma involves using our inbuilt abilities to imagine and interpret the world from a different perspective. (You should be noticing a theme, by now.) As Graeber noted, movements since the sixties have reframed the issue by lowering their sights.^[63] Rather than think of it as lowering the bar, though, Graeber is getting at the frequent implementation “of the logic of direct action,” which he defined as “the defiant insistence on acting if one is already free”^[64] – effectively putting theory creatively into practice, albeit in ways that have heretofore left a brutal and impinging bureaucratic context intact. How, then, can we keep the radical imagination alive while coalescing insurrectionary upheaval and everyday actions that

cut against the grain into visions and strategies capable of winning a world without capitalism, the state or other co-opting modes of bureaucratic authority?

Well, if we are “to start in that direction,” Graeber seemed to believe, “the first thing we need to do is to recognize that we do, in fact, win some.”^[65] As he documented, the Left (opponents of bureaucratic violence more generally), by way of the Global Justice Movement, managed a direct action-driven defeat of the worst of the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund agreements and policies. Before that, the anti-nuclear movements of the late 1970s and 1980s, while oftentimes unsuccessful in the short-term, won a near-moratorium on nuclear power plant construction and the legitimation of new forms of “feminist-inspired direct democracy”^[66] in the process.

Moreover, the contrarian historical research Graeber did with collaborator David Wengrow evinced how prehistoric and early agricultural societies both often cycled back and forth on a seasonal basis between hierarchical forms of organization and egalitarian organizational forms.^[67] At some point, the hierarchies solidified. We do not have to accept the assumed inevitability of the trajectory we took. Nor should we let extant bureaucracies obstructing the humanizing imagination trick us into thinking the present state of affairs immutable. Graeber and Wengrow invited us to check our preconceptions and prejudices to entertain the evidence indicating participatory democracy and egalitarian social relations have been quite commonplace in cities and even in expansive confederacies throughout history.

Less common historically, Graeber and Wengrow acknowledged, has been egalitarian family and household life. “Once the historical verdict is in,” they wrote, “we will see that the most painful loss of human freedoms began at the small scale – the level of gender relations, age groups, and domestic servitude – the kind of relationships that contain at once the greatest intimacy and the deepest forms of structural violence.”^[68] In addition to the ongoing significance of the ’68 slogans quoted above, the old feminist adage that “the personal is political” appears equally apropos for the current conjuncture, if we engage with Graeber and Wengrow in good faith. They even predicted that it is in those smaller scale domestic and personal spaces “where the most difficult work of creating a free society will have to take place.”^[69] It is also in those spaces where a key component of abolitionist (and abolition feminist) strategy can find fertile ground. Such strategies likely call for a pedagogical reimagining of the values we instill in youth and efforts to teach and learn “justice” outside of the reigning punitive and retributive paradigms. Bureaucratic models of justice have hitherto justified state terror, racist policing and the obscenity of plucking people out of communities to lock them in cages (further damaging those communities in the process).

The established structures of domination pervert our imaginative potential, insidiously promoting identification with the forces responsible for enforcing asinine behaviors and for maintaining an order predicated upon them. Graeber's ideas took concrete form in the Occupy Wall Street movement he helped get off the ground – one of the recent movements he deemed a viable experiment “in what a genuinely non-bureaucratized social order, based on the power of practical imagination, might look like.”^[70] Graeber also equipped us with the intellectual fuel needed to think beyond what prevails at present. He outlined frameworks for informing and catalyzing emergent exercises in opening up the horizon of possibility to actualize the collective potential of our imagination. The onus is upon us to use his gift going forward.

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[1] David Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination: An Essay on Structural Stupidity,” in *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 45-47.

[2] Graeber. “Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 48.

[3] I gave a talk a few years back critically grappling with some of the points in that “Dead Zones” essay. I did so by considering Graeber's arguments in relation to higher education. To modify a sage aphorism slightly, critical reflection can be the highest form of flattery – and it can pave the road to greater understanding. Despite disagreeing with some of what he wrote, I nevertheless learned a lot from his work; I have learned even more upon reexamining what he wrote, and I have revised some of my previous thoughts as a result.

[4] Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 90.

[5] Ibid.

[6] David Graeber, “The Iron Law of Liberalism and the Era of Total Bureaucratization,” *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 18.

[7] Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 83.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Graeber, “The Iron Law of Liberalism and the Era of Total Bureaucratization,” 9.

[10] Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 57.

[11] David Graeber, “Turning Modes of Production Inside Out: Or, Why Capitalism is a Transformation of Slavery,” *Critique of Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (2006): 76.

[12] Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination,” 67.

[13] Ibid., 70.

- [14] Graeber, "Turning Modes of Production Inside Out," 76.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011), 29.
- [17] Graeber, "Turning Modes of Production Inside Out," 76.
- [18] David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (Spiegel & Grau: New York, 2013, 283-284.
- [19] The criticisms of markets are drawn largely from Michael Albert, *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (Verso: New York, 2003).
- [20] Graeber, "Turning Modes of Production Inside Out," 77.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Ibid., 77-78.
- [23] Graeber, "The Iron Law of Liberalism and the Era of Total Bureaucratization," 31-32.
- [24] Ibid., 32.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination," 73.
- [27] Ibid.
- [28] Ibid., 74.
- [29] Ibid., 80.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Ibid., 70.
- [34] Ibid., 69.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Ibid., 71.
- [37] Ibid., 71-72.
- [38] Graeber, "Turning Modes of Production Inside Out," 74.
- [39] Ibid., 75.
- [40] Ibid., 74.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] Ibid., 70.
- [43] Ibid., 75.
- [44] Ibid.
- [45] Ibid.

- [46] Ibid., 81.
- [47] Ibid.
- [48] Ibid.
- [49] Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (Henry Holt and Company, LLC: New York, 2003), 6.
- [50] Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination," 83.
- [51] Ibid., 48.
- [52] Ibid., 48-49.
- [53] Graeber, "The Iron Law of Liberalism and the Era of Total Bureaucratization," 26.
- [54] Ibid.
- [55] Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination," 88.
- [56] Ibid., 99.
- [57] Ibid.
- [58] Ibid., 95-96.
- [59] Ibid., 92.
- [60] Ibid.
- [61] Ibid., 92-93.
- [62] Ibid., 97.
- [63] Ibid., 96.
- [64] Ibid., 97.
- [65] David Graeber, "The Shock of Victory," *Rolling Thunder*, no. 5 (2008): 20.
- [66] Graeber, "The Shock of Victory," 14.
- [67] David Graeber and David Wengrow, "How to change the course of human history (at least, the part that's already happened)," *Eurozine* (March 2, 2018).
- [68] Graeber and Wengrow, "How to change the course of human history," section 5, para. 8.
- [69] Ibid.
- [70] Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination," 100.