



## All Economies are Ultimately Human Economies<sup>1</sup>

**David Graeber**

*David Rolfe Graeber (1961-2020) was an American Anthropologist, anarchist activist and author known for his books *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011), *The Utopia of Rules* (2015) and *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (2018). He worked at the Anthropology department at Yale (1998-2005), as reader in social anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London (2007-2013), and afterwards, until his death, as a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics.*

Or, what are the material conditions that would produce the kind of people one would most wish to have as friends?

They asked me to talk about human economies which is a phrase that actually originally developed in a book about anthropology. Noticing that money is used very different ways in different economies that anthropologists observed. There are places where money is used, as we do, primarily to get goods and services. There is also places where money is used mainly to rearrange social relations and you can't buy and sell anything. An idea which is extremely odd and unfamiliar to most people. So I decided to call these human economies. But in a larger sense it occurs to me that all economies are really human economies. The strange thing about capitalism is that it is the only system that can make us forget this. And I was particularly struck by the confluence and thinking on this when I was in Rojava.

---

<sup>1</sup> From a lecture given at the 2015 Conference *Challenging Capitalist Modernity II: Dissecting Capitalist Modernity—Building Democratic Confederalism* in Hamburg. The full record of the conference can be found at [http://ocalanbooks.com/downloads/ENG-book\\_Challenging-capitalist-modernity-II.pdf](http://ocalanbooks.com/downloads/ENG-book_Challenging-capitalist-modernity-II.pdf)



Articles in vol. 21(2) and later of this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System, University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Early December I was part of a delegation visiting a rehabilitation center for wounded YPG/J fighters in the town of Amude, and the co-director of the clinic, Agir Merdîn, was describing the medical philosophy he felt lay behind the social order they were trying to build in Rojava. Their philosophy, he explained, was essentially preventative. To understand the prevalence of many diseases one had to start with social factors (it's impossible to prevent disease unless we have a healthy society, based on seeing human life as part of nature; "if the heart is sick, the body is too"); the most important of those, he felt, was stress; if, for example, cities could be rebuilt to be 70% green space, levels of stress would decline immediately, and with them, rates of heart disease, diabetes, even, he was confident, cancer. Yet he also insisted it was not just a question of integration with nature, but also of social ties: loneliness, social isolation, is engineered in modern society as a mode of social control. I was very struck by the way he put it, he said we call this "modern slavery." He said, since, in the past, slavery was imposed by swords; but in the contemporary world the situation is in a way more primitive, because at least in the past those sheared of all social connections by capture and sale as slaves knew that they were slaves; nowadays, they think this situation of isolation actually is freedom. That Isolation in turn creates stress, and stress, lays us open to disease.

But to understand the health and the body in this sense, as part of a web of social relations, required a radical shift in perspectives about what society was actually about. Later after dinner, meditating on a cigarette, he remarked, "after all, we always talk about 'production' as if we were all about making things. But in any social system, the most important thing you're producing is always human beings. That's the way we think of it. Labor is ultimately about producing people."

I found this slightly startling because I had myself written a book called *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value* arguing exactly this point—one I'm pretty confident that pretty much nobody had ever read certainly not in Kurdistan. So I got excited a lot about how these ideas were converging. Let me, then, turn to some arguments there, and explain why I think they might be helpful to those engaged in projects of revolutionary transformation. Particularly when I was writing about the production of people and I was kind of coming out of a feminist reading of Marx. I was inspired by these feminist readings of Marx.

In a way, the point I was making is straight out of Marx, indeed, could be said to be the essence of Marx's critique of capitalism, even though most Marxists—the main exception being certain strains of Marxist feminism—seem to have entirely forgotten it. It is precisely that it inverts our understanding of the importance of production of people and production of things. Nowhere in the ancient world, Marx once remarked, did anyone ever write a book on the question "how should society be organized to produce the greatest overall material wealth?" Nowadays of course this is almost the only question we are allowed to ask, if we are to be taken seriously in the halls of power, but in fact ancient authors—and the same can be said of those in any civilization other than our contemporary ones—assumed that the real question to ask is what are the circumstances that will produce the best people: the kind you would wish to have as neighbors, friends, or fellow-citizens. The production of wealth was considered a subordinate moment in that larger process: too much wealth will cause idleness and luxury, too little will mean people are too busy trying to

survive to dedicate their time to civic activities, and so forth. Then Marxists tend to forget this because of the particular way that Marx's book is organized. It is sort of an internal critique of capitalist categories. So that he adopts the terms that the economists of his time used and he is trying to demonstrate that even if you assume that Adam Smith David Ricardo and all these authors are right and markets do really work, he says they do it all because of free labor. Even if you grant the political economists their assumption, I can demonstrate that everything will still be contradictory and self-destruct. Since a lot of Marxists tend to treat Marx's work as if it were a biblical scripture they tend to forget that this is as if Marx said it, it has to be true and they completely warp their perspectives. He did not actually think that these things were true and he certainly did not think that they were that perspective of capital that he was adopting in the book was good. So there is a tendency to reproduce the categories unless you want to think them. And those have become the dominant categories of our time. Anthropologists have, certainly, found this to be true as well. In most societies that have existed throughout human history, there is no such thing as an "economy."

In breaks between chopping vegetables, Cameron told his interviewer that whilst he was obviously keen to be re-elected and to govern the world's sixth biggest economy till 2020, he wouldn't be seeking another five years after that. So that's what Great Britain is to those who rule it: an economy. This kind of logic takes its most extreme form in those world bank-trained economists in Africa who will occasionally make remarks that it's a real problem that half the population might soon be dying of AIDS, because it will have disastrous effects on the economy. At one, the economy was assumed to be the way one kept the population fed and clothed and in proper housing, so that they could remain alive; now the best reason you can come up with the regret that they will all be dead is because of the effects on the overall levels of production of goods and services.

"The economy" is assumed to correspond to that domain in which we talk about "value"—particularly, of course, monetary value, but also the value of anything that can be measured monetarily. Essentially this can be seen as the domain in which labor is directed towards the acquisition of money. As a result, as Marx was the first to demonstrate, money takes on a peculiar double role. On the one hand money it represents the value of labor, it's how society conceives and measures the importance of the creative energies through which we shape and create the world around us, by saying this amount of creative effort is worth this much money—this proportion of the total amount of money in circulation—and this amount is worth this other amount. But at the same time, it's not just a symbol that represents the importance of one's actions, it's a symbol that—in practice—brings into being the very thing it represents, because, after all, you only do the work to get the money. The result is a kind of hall of mirrors where "work" itself comes to be defined as that which you do to get the money that ultimately is just a representation of the value of work.

When people start talking about values, family values—politicians always talk about family values—but we also talk about religious values, political ideals, art, value, we deal exactly with those areas where labor is not commoditized. The major form of work that isn't paid is domestic

work. So these are the things which we are not supposed to think about this labor at all, but of course they are and those values are values because they are unique. Money is a value where you can talk about value in singular because money can compare everything to everything else. But if you move to the domain of values where labor is not commoditized, then, in fact, each value is valuable because it can't be compared to anything else. So you can't come up with a formula of how much it is enough to neglect your family and the pursuit of religion. But on the other hand this is where that pernicious effect of taking capitalist categories and naturalizing them is most pernicious because this whole domain in radical theory is called "reproductive" labor. It is almost biological, it is this thing which does not really produce value for capitalism, so it is secondary. In fact that is the primary form of labor and what you do in effect it is secondary. The major form of labor and the creation of social value is a production of each other, that we are ourselves projects of mutual creation. If you think about what is happening to capitalism today, it is financialization. They are producing all of these incredibly complicated forms of value and at some degree it is just simply a form of cover for the military domination. It is very important that the chief financial power is always the military powers. They want us to think that somehow countries in South America or Asia are sending things to Europe and North America and not getting much in return because they are somehow confused by the complexity of their financial instruments. Nobody is actually that dumb, basically it is a military shakedown. On the one hand what finance does is to operate with state power to create debt. On the other hand domestic form of labor or social production is regulated as feminists have long pointed out. There is a million form of different science that is all about regulating and managing those forms of labor. Essentially, what finance is doing is taking those forms of measurement and spreading it out to the entire society, so emotional labor. Financialization is about commoditization of love, of trust, as micro-credit does it that it takes family ties, forms of creativity and figures out its stamp on it in a million of different ways. Actually we need to reformulate our basic ideas about value.

As feminist Marxists have long remarked, another pernicious effect of the value system is to define what's considered "work" and what's not. If one does not receive direct cash payment, it's not actually "labor" at all, or, in political economy terms, "not productive" (that is, productive of value for capitalists.) One of the weirder effects of the divinization of Marx's texts, which become analogous to religious scripture, is that this logic—which Marx meant as an internal critique of the terms of bourgeois economics, a way of saying "let's pretend for the sake of argument the world really does operate the way the capitalists say it does, I can still show that it will produce contradictions that will ultimately destroy it"—is then taken as reality, because Marx described it! As a result women's caring labor, for example, is treated as merely "reproductive" (with all that term's implicitly biological overtones), rather than as the form of labor that's ultimately the most productive, since society itself is ultimately simply the process of mutual creation of human beings.

In the 19th century there was a kind of conceptual revolution. I really believe that all the revolutions are essentially moral transformations. They take common sense and basically political common sense, our most fundamental ideas about what life, what politics, what an economy actually is. So when you have revolutionary moments—French Revolution, 1848, 1917, 1968, all

of these were moments where basic assumptions changed in sort of global interaction—there was a transformation of common sense. In the 19th century, the labor theory of value—which imagined the factory worker as the paradigmatic creator—was internalized by the working classes, and became a remarkably effective means of mass mobilization worldwide. The idea is people came to realize “well, the world is something we make, it’s not something that just exists. Every day, we get up and we create the world. Why can’t we make it differently?” I mean, it is paradox because if we are all collectively making the world why isn’t it that we don’t make a world that we particularly like? Almost nobody actually likes it, even the ruling class doesn’t like it. That is also a great paradox of leftist thought as it emerged in the 19th century. Here we are collectively creating a world that we don’t like very much every day. Capitalism doesn’t even exist or is something imposed on us, we make it. We wake up every day and we make capitalism, why can’t we make something else? This is the great revolutionary question. It is remarkably difficult and in a way all social theory is about that: “Why can’t we just wake up and make something else?”. So the labor theory of value is one way of posing that question and trying to answer it. It proved to be somewhat flawed because it fell in to that very notion that what production is, is the production of things and not of people. And as a result there is a paradox. Yet it was always marked by a central contradiction: that members of the working class were simultaneously proud of their work, and at the same time, in rebellion against the very idea of work. Over the course of the 20th century, capitalists have, through a sustained and determined ideological offensive, managed to largely replace this older ethos with a notion that value is ultimately produced from the brains of entrepreneurs, and that work is essentially mindless and robotic; it has thus come to be validated, instead, as something moral in itself. Work is promoted as necessary for character, and certainly anyone who does not spend most of his time laboring at something he does not particularly like is assumed to be a fundamentally bad person. This way of evaluating work has created innumerable paradoxes, as I’ve tried to document in my piece “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs.” As automation has slowly eliminated much of what used to be necessary work, the imperative to nonetheless have the population work ever longer hours and more intensely, the politics of growth and employment as the solution for any problem, have in fact produced millions and millions of utterly useless, meaningless administrative jobs: an endless parade of strategic vision managers, human resource consultants, lobbyists, not to mention whole industries such as telemarketing and corporate law, which seem to exist for no reason other than to keep people working. And at the same time, there seems a near-perfect inverse relationship between the actual social usefulness of a given job, with obviously necessary tasks such as nursing, cooking, rubbish collection, bridge maintenance, and the like, or increasingly, teaching, the least well compensated, while the most useless or even counter-productive—who always, like executives, boast about the endless hours they spend on the job, even if they are doing nothing—are rewarded the most.

What’s more, according to the prevailing ideology, this is, at least on a subtle level, seen as only right. Even as corporations will assume that if there’s a job that anyone would possibly want to do for any reason other than the money (artistic design, translation even) they shouldn’t have to pay for it—even as they lavish fortunes on legions of meaningless corporate bureaucrats—so

teachers or even auto-makers become the object of populist resentment when they are seen to be overpaid, almost as if to say, “but you get to make cars or teach children! That’s real work! And now you want high wages, job security, and benefits too?” Even knowing that your work is worthwhile and helps others is seen, in some perverse way, as making it more gratifying and thus subtracting from its value!

Clearly what we need here is a complete reversal of perspective, and it seems to me the only way to achieve this is to start by replacing the older version of the labor theory of value with a new one which precisely, begins with social production, caring labor, and makes that the paradigm for any meaningfully productive labor—in the sense that even the production of material necessities is valuable precisely insofar as it can be seen as an extension of the principle of care for others, and the mutual creation of human beings. As soon as we do so, it should become obvious that, despite constant absurd declarations that the working class has somehow vanished with the reduction of factory labor, the working classes have always—even in Marx’s time—been the “caring classes,” insofar as they’ve been primarily composed of care-givers, care-takers, not to mention, gardeners, custodians, and those involved in creating nurturant environments to allow things to flourish and grow. (This is true especially of working class women, but it was always true of quite a large percentage of working-class men.)

How would a labor movement based on this notion of a human economy re-imagine the world? Let me end by suggesting one way. We are used to thinking of “communism” as some idealized future state, or maybe something that existed in the distant past (“primitive communism”) and will perhaps exist again someday in the future. It is assumed that the basis of “communism” will necessarily be collective property arrangements. But if one brushes away the rather formal, legalistic definition of property arrangements, and instead talks about forms of access—that is, one goes back to the original concept, of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs,” we find that most work is already organized on communistic lines. When someone in a workplace is fixing a pipe, and says “hand me the wrench,” the other person does not say “and what do I get in return?” Essentially communistic principles are applied because it’s the only thing that really works. It follows that in a very real sense capitalism itself is just a bad way of organizing communism. Similarly, communistic relations of this sort exist between any two people who are in a close relation of trust, and treat each other as if they will always be there for one another, and therefore, where counting inputs and outputs, who’s given what to whom, would be absurd. And finally, communism forms as it were the bedrock of all human sociability, since if one is dealing with a person who does not consider an enemy, even a stranger, if the need is great enough (“I’m drowning”) or the cost small enough (“Could you give me directions?” “Do you have a light?”) communistic principles are assumed to apply—and of course, in many social systems, that bedrock of what I’d call “baseline communism” is extended well beyond that, for instance, it becomes impossible to refuse a request for food, of any sort, or even clothing.

Communism of this sort is not the only principle and I think it would be almost impossible to imagine a society in which it would be the only principle. There will always be others. But re-imagining what we are already doing in this sense can provide a starting point to the realization

that it's just this sort of open-ended responsibility to one another which is at the core of caring relations as well, and that, in this sense, it is the unrecognized foundation of all forms of social value. It also means that in an important sense we are already living in communism. The question is to find a mode of democratic coordination of those already-existing forms of communism, to leave people as free as they can be to form those commitments they wish with one another, and ultimately, to be able to choose for themselves what forms of value, individually or collectively, they wish to pursue.

We had one moral transformation already: I think in 2011 we had a revolutionary moment with the revolutions starting in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Greece, then with the Occupy movement, that spread all over the world. And those were violently put down. But ever since the beginning of radical democratic movements, they no longer seek to see state power. There has been a fundamental change in our very conception of what a democratic social movement is, this is what we have seen in Rojava as well. There is a moral transformation, there is a transformation of our basic political categories which is what a revolution really is. But I think in order to go further with it, we need to change our categories of what labor is. It is just as in the 19th century the idea that labor theory and value is production was incredibly effective. Although it turned out that it had very real limits which allowed it to hear reverse, we needed to change our conception of labor to one that starts from caring what society is, is a process of a mutual creation of human beings. It is not just a creation of a material world, it is the creation of each other, that's what we are doing.

Caring and education are the primary things. There is a free education movement right now in Amsterdam, in London, there is a huge student movement emerging. One of the first things that they are putting in a plank is that we have been told that the purpose of education is to improve the economy. This is backwards. The purpose of the economy should be to improve education, to give people the freedom in leisure to understand the world, to learn things. I think that it's true if you take education as part of that broader process of caring of mutual support that creates the world by which we create each other. So I think that if we begin to look at the world that way, of course that is the way of most people who have ever lived, gain to see the world. Now in most societies it's just assumed that material production of iPhones and glasses and material objects it's just one supporting that moment in a broader process by which we create each other and of creating people. Thus, factory labor is a form of labor if the stuff you are producing in the factory is things that people care about, what people need, but it's a sort of second order form, it's all things that are really useful and what's the primary business of human life. We are just taking care of each other. I think that if we do that, if we transform our categories and rethink the world and make that common sense then we will truly have achieved a revolution.