FORUM
Mavericks
Harvey, Graeber, and the reunification of anarchism and Marxism in world anthropology

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New books discussed in this article:

Preamble (by way of an anecdote)

I met Theo van der Giessen sometime in January 1980. The sudden sweep of radical mass squatter movements in several Dutch cities fascinated me intensely, as it did so many others of my generation. Friends in Amsterdam invited me to come and see the escalating fight around De Grote Keizer (the Great Kaiser). De Keizer was a prime urban property owned by a Dutch multinational company with close ties to the state, now thrown onto the emerging market of urban gentrification—a concept we didn’t yet have, though we did have a sense of what it came to stand for. De Keizer was located in the historic center, on the princely Keizersgracht. It was squatted with the intention of turning it literally into a protomilitary bulwark against the state, and it became a potent symbol of urban resistance.

Squatters’ movements, in particular but not only in Amsterdam, had become uniquely cohesive in the preceding years and surprisingly politically effective. They appeared ready to forcefully defend the democratic right to the city against the constitutionally enshrined liberal
right to property (and hence speculation). Dutch squatters’ movements practiced the insights of the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre and the then still young (and still Marxist) Manuel Castells—who was fascinated by the Dutch developments but, not knowing Dutch, failed to really study them—as well as David Harvey. Not many of us who were directly involved in squatting and “direct actions” had read any of this work. Nor had I.

Van der Giessen and his crew had metal-plated the inside of the six majestic seventeenth-century patrician houses that formed the property. Impressive wooden and iron structures now supported the walls and windows from the inside and could supposedly withstand any “normal” police attack. On the roof, six stories high, were placed scores of old television sets, refrigerators, old bathtubs, and buckets with oil, to be used as urban projectiles. Tens of thousands of squatters and sympathizers in Amsterdam and the country at large—some said more than 20,000 in Amsterdam alone, but no one knew exactly how many—could be mobilized within a couple of hours via a “telephone chain” and via Radio de Keizer, an illegal 24/7 broadcaster located in the building. These people formed the “outer guard”, which would resist the police on the street. Hundreds of what we used to call “the hard core” would be inside the building, seemingly ready to risk their limbs while defending De Keizer as a squatters’ commons. From a group of some twenty key people, Theo van der Giessen, a tall, charismatic, energetic man with a Maoist background, had stood out in persuading-cum-pushing the tens of thousands of young squatters in the city into a unified political movement. By 1980, squatting in Amsterdam was not just about occupying empty buildings both privately and publicly owned—of which there were many in the late 1970s due to capitalist and urban crises. In the preceding years they had learned that, in order to be able to do just that, they had to be ready to collectively confront hard political power, including the deep legality of property and security structures in the urban state. Van der Giessen and others had explained, and then demonstrated in action, that the neighborhood-based squatter groups, generally of an anarchist bent and obviously into “direct action”, would be destroyed one by one if they did not become more overtly political and join their forces for concerted and proactive mobilizations. De Keizer and the organization around it was the ultimate embodiment of that radically confrontational practice—though much more was soon to come.

One day in January I happened to be hanging around De Keizer as an “outer guard”. We got a signal that the police were harassing some of “our people” a few hundred meters away. The situation had been tense for days and there was talk of a pending attack by security forces. I ran toward the designated place, not knowing what to expect or do. I saw two police cars and a handful of officers running around and pulling some people toward the cars. I was completely inexperienced and paralyzed. But then there was, at once, Van der Giessen. Tall, imposing, long dark hair, black leather jacket—somewhere between Moses and Che Guevara. He screamed to me from a distance, pointing to some loose cobblestones on the side of the road. With just one big stone upheld in his hand and intense eyes, he now moved slowly to the scene in a menacing fashion, with swift and commanding reactions to any movements around him, and with just me as his totally ineffective backup. From a three- or four-meter proximity he ordered the officers back into their cars, all while holding the big stone above his head, pointing it now to this agent and then to another. His victory over some 6 armed police officers in not more than 20 seconds was stunning.

Aha, I thought in my youthful excitement, so that is how you do this. It seemed an easy thing. But of course it wasn’t. It was not a military victory but a moral one. It presupposed a history of increasingly rough fights around the legitimacy of property speculation, around housing policy and urban politics. It also could not have happened without a clear left-right division in urban public culture, nor without the gradual tipping of the moral and physical balance of power in the bigger cities, and in particular in Amsterdam, against the rights of property and the
state. Dual power, in one way or another, was a fact. Crucially, the recently installed right-wing government in The Hague, elected by the expanding suburbs and the suburbanizing provinces, was seeking an open confrontation in the urban centers with what it perceived as chaos, disobedience, and moral degeneracy, not unlike what Stuart Hall *cum suis* described in *Policing the Crisis* (1978) as “authoritarian paternalism”. Van der Giessen did not throw a stone or cause any injury at that point—though he constantly boasted in public about the readiness of the squatters to do so in self-defense. The action that I observed was commanding because it dramatized a claim to rightful and forceful popular resistance against a police corps and a state that were perceived in the inner cities as increasingly illegitimate. In January 1980 in the space around De Grote Keizer, his martial gestures were immediately understood. But it took someone like him, who was able to embody all of this, self-consciously, to set the symbolic drama in motion.

What would David Graeber think of a Van der Giessen and the Dutch 1980s squatters’ uprising? In *The Democracy Project* (2013), Graeber’s book on Occupy Wall Street (OWS), he goes out of his way to advocate nonviolence. Ghandi is his example, and his focus is entirely on “consensual process”, “general assemblies”, and democracy without leadership, as already prefigured in his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004). And he celebrates OWS for it. No place here for the confrontational charisma and pushy politics of a Van der Giessen—though assemblies, instead of being something new, as so often wrongly claimed these days, were a common arrangement in the 1970s and 1980s in Europe, also among the squatters’ movements. David Harvey, in *Rebel Cities* (2013) and *The Enigma of Capital* (2011), is more agnostic about “violence”: for Harvey it is not likely that a genuine popular democratic shift in power over the state, property, and accumulation will evolve entirely peacefully, given the overwhelming security structures and repressive tactics against which this will inevitably have to be claimed. One cannot prescribe what sort of tactics will be useful in what sort of conjuncture, he argues. In contrast to Graeber, he does not spend many words on the moralities of political resistance, which are in a sense the singular focus of Graeber’s OWS book and of much current “horizontalist” preoccupations as well. Nor does he dwell on the imagined differences with earlier supposedly “hierarchical” strategies for taking power.

In earlier work and in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), Graeber emphasizes repeatedly that common people through most of history have shunned direct confrontation with their rulers. They would rather evade their exploiters when the pressure of debt and oppression became too hard to bear. They voted with their feet, left the oppressive cities and moved back to the open spaces, the deserts, the forests. Liberation from corruption is apparently not to be achieved in the heart of civilization, but on the wild frontiers. Conceptually, that is also what Graeber advocates in *The Democracy Project*. Resistance will emerge from a “network of liberated spaces” brought into the city, of which he sees Zuccotti Park during OWS as an example. These liberated spaces are supposedly placed outside the capitalist structures and offer an opportunity to escape from oppressive constraints while signaling, peacefully and consensually, the moral bankruptcy of the present order. That order will then presumably be left to crumble from its own inner corruption.

Harvey is heir to Lefebvre’s “right to the city”. No glorious escape from capitalist urbanity in his work, predictably, and no imagined possibility of untainted “liberated spaces” destroying the capitalist order from the moral outside. Harvey represents the old European tradition captured in the German proverb *Stadtluft macht frei*. (literally: “city air liberates”) Resistance for him is by definition urban. It should focus its energies on urban governance by confronting the underlying power structures. The city is the inescapable and potentially liberating site for common living and working in complex societies, even while it is simultaneously a machine for generating inequality, dispossession, and accumulation. He interlaces his analyses of the
state-finance nexus—key to modern capitalism in his view, on which more below—with narratives of historical and contemporary urban revolts that directly confronted urban rulers. He also rejects the obsession in current oppositional politics with horizontalism and its refusal of leadership, formal organization, and hierarchy. He points at horizontalism’s failure of coordination and synchronization, its inability to prefigure and experiment with alternative forms of rule and thus to produce the necessary competent personnel.

And so the tactical and strategic divide between some of the foremost authors on the (anthropological) intellectual left seems complete. Nevertheless, Graeber and Harvey are interested, intellectually and practically, in the ongoing re-unification of the anarchist and Marxist intellectual traditions. Once agonistically united within European left-wing radicalism, they were pulled apart by the blowup between Marx and Bakunin in the aftermath of the Paris Commune in 1872 and subsequently baptized in blood during the Russian and Spanish civil wars. Apart from substance there was always also a contrast in style of reasoning, living, and action. Graeber, however, speaks noticeably more respectfully about Marx in his learned book on debt than in his earlier pamphlet on anarchist anthropology. Harvey and Graeber also agree that we should be inspired by, and have a good look at, populist urban mobilizations such as those that happened recently in El Alto, Bolivia. I mention this one in particular—they discuss many more—because both authors analyze it in some detail and are similarly impressed. Why this unexpected agreement on El Alto and other recent urban cases? And how do these diverging ideas of political tactics relate to the broader intellectual substance of their work? Finally, what insights may the story of the Dutch squatters’ rebellions around 1980 add to their work, both tactically and analytically?

David Harvey and David Graeber are in fact maverick anthropologists. The first may be a distinguished professor of anthropology, but as a trained geographer he is working on a higher level of abstraction and aggregation than most anthropologists do. He also holds theory in radically higher esteem than the anthropological discipline often does—and not just “grounded theory”. He is therefore routinely and willfully placed outside the proper confines of the discipline. Graeber, trained as an anthropologist in Chicago, was rejected for jobs in US academia despite impressive publications, perhaps similarly because his work did not strike many as properly “anthropological”. But both are also celebrated: Graeber has become nothing less than a global star whose deeply scholarly book on debt has sold more than 100,000 copies in the English version alone in two years time and was immediately translated into dozens of other languages; he has also become one of the most learned advocates for anarchism in the West. Harvey’s books and website are among the most widely read in the social sciences at large, including by anthropologists, and represent some of the best that the Marxist tradition, in comeback mode, has on offer.

Is it the continued fetishism of bounded field-based ethnography that leads to a rejection of more philosophical, theoretical, historical, and synoptical work grappling with the big questions? Are big visions and articulate theoretical accounts just not to be called anthropology because “we” are “myopically preoccupied with local complexity,” as Keith Hart recently wrote (2013: 220)? Are “we” at best interested in some “grounded theory”? The history of the field, current, recent, and classical, does not necessarily suggest that this should be so. If anything, anthropology seems the disciplinary place for a programmatic methodological pluralism and for radical transdisciplinary experiments. The sheer acknowledged relevance and avant-garde quality of the work of Harvey and Graeber underlines the intellectual bankruptcy of this knee-jerk response within the discipline. Graeber has written the grandest historical treatise the discipline has produced in the last hundred years, and is now in a way one of the most famous anthropologists on earth—pace his discipline’s lack of esteem for just that grand vision that tout le monde was apparently waiting for.
These four books by Graeber and Harvey are complementary in interesting ways. This is so for the analysis of the current and ongoing crisis, for a vision of the miracle year of world rebellions in fragments, 2011 (and in fact ongoing), but in particular for the focus and substance of their findings and approaches. I will concentrate on this latter aspect. Graeber has in fact not much original to say about the last decades of financialization and the ensuing crisis of finance capital in the 2000s. Just 10 percent of the 400 pages of the book (excluding notes, etc.) are dedicated to it, and it is not where the book’s discoveries or surprises are. Even the capitalist epoch of the last 500 years and in a sense the very idea of capitalism do not appear as his driving interests, though he certainly has interesting things to say about them. The two books by Harvey, in contrast, have their actual problematic in the current crisis of financialized capitalism and focus entirely on the history and analysis of speculative capitalism and the politics driving it forward over the last 300 years or so. Harvey, not surprisingly, also offers a firmer grasp of the capitalist state and modern finance. Graeber, then, excels in uncovering the “modes of morality” surrounding money, credit, debt, and markets over the very long run of civilizational history, starting around 3000 BC, in which he discovers cyclical patterns in a profoundly original way. And there are the endless complementarities of anarchism and Marxism as structures of thought and feeling.

Graeber: Modes of morality
without modes of production

_Debt_ is an enjoyable and masterful narrative of the history of credit and money as forms of social interaction and sources of moral philosophizing. This is jumbo history. But it is composed of myriad small stories that are never irrelevant and often surprisingly illuminating. They are told in an engaging style and with a readiness to speculate whenever that furthers the interrogation and the vision. The book spans 5,000 years of global human history, from Sumer and the Mesopotamian civilizations, through the Indian, Chinese, and antique Mediterranean empires, via an original conception of the “global middle ages”, to the capitalist empires of Europe, and then finally the age of American hegemony. A colleague told me, “It’s like reading the National Geographic,” and it was meant as a compliment. The traditional nineteenth-century role of the anthropologist, telling systematic and empirically informed stories about the history of humanity for a wider public, has been almost totally usurped by popular writers such as Jared Diamond or even Robert Kaplan. There is also a thriving new global history, much of it relevant for anthropology, with few contributions from anthropologists among it, Jack Goody being the exception. Graeber’s _Debt_ has at once changed that picture. It not only tells an even bigger story, time-wise and territory-wise. But it also, and simultaneously, originates from the political and public needs of this precise moment of indebtedness, credit crunch, and capitalist crisis in the West linked to global transformation.

As you will have heard by now, Graeber’s answer is straightforward and radical: Jubilee, a “clean slate”, debt forgiveness, as was common in Sumer and other Mesopotamian societies at the moment of the inauguration of a new king. Under capitalist rule, however, this will certainly not happen. Does this imply that Western society is waiting for a king capable of reinserting money and markets into a new cosmological order and convincing us that debt is not _Schuld_, as in Sumer? In _Debt_ Graeber’s style remains academic, though political, throughout, even while at times extremely loose. But the very logic of his vision suggests that we are at the end of the capitalist era and underway to something else, something that we cannot perceive well yet, and he draws that conclusion explicitly. _The Democracy Project_, an admittedly different genre of writing, proposes that the new king and the new cosmological order, if it emerges, may spring from a “network of liberated spaces” as exemplified by Occupy. In Graeber’s view and with a bow to Marcel Mauss—his
ultimate academic inspiration—it is there that the gift as the basis of social life will be nurtured and claimed; or better, perhaps, as he argues in *Debt*, not just the gift but “everyday communism”—a nod to Kropotkin, the anarchist prince, more than to Mauss.

What is this historical vision, then? And how does he arrive at it? *Debt* joins a lustful eye for detail and microhistories with a strong will to conceptual-historical jumbo ordering. That ordering happens by way of Graeber’s extensively explained “principles of morality”, which are based on exchange theory, derived, among others, from Mauss and Polanyi—who are hardly discussed. More than half the book is devoted to such conceptual construction, amazing for a popular best seller. This is where the master shows his hand: even his long theoretical exercises rarely become dry or boring. In its best passages the book deals imaginatively and speculatively precisely with the speculations and imaginings of the epochs it studies. The reader is continuously invited to learn a history, to imagine a situation, to identify with the dilemmas, experiences, and fantasies of fathers, mothers, traders, kings, small peasants, Adam Smith, prophets, Chinese mandarins, Islamic entrepreneurs, Buddhist monks, and so on. But it is here, in its conceptual underpinnings—and in how they structure the approach and the evidence—that the deeper tensions and very substantial unresolved issues of the book lie. These tensions turn, to put it starkly and curtly, around the repressed relationship of Graeber’s modes of morality to Marx’s modes of production.

Graeber starts out by rejecting the historical primacy of barter as assumed by Adam Smith and neoclassical economics. Smith argues that money, a universal equivalent that has itself no use value, was a practical solution for the limitations of barter by making markets function more efficiently. Marshaling the existing anthropological knowledge, Graeber shows that barter has historically been limited to small-scale kinship-based communities, where it is part of more general reciprocities among people who live in durable relationships of interdependence. There is no evolutionary progression from barter to money and markets. Money and markets presuppose a different type and scale of society.

Second, he dismisses the idea that money came before debt. He endorses the early twentieth-century (German) “state theory of money”, in which money is seen as historically closely associated with the emergence of states, taxes, and militaries. Money coins emerge historically when imperial states start to pay their soldiers in pieces of precious metal extracted from the imperial mines. But before such military empires emerged around powerful cities by 500 BC, there had been thousands of years in which loans and debts were made, registered, as well as discussed and politically dealt with by temples and courts. Debt, thus, is the urtype of exchange, Graeber concludes persuasively. I note that this is about vertical, complex, and durable social relationships, not horizontal short-term dyadic exchange. It is therefore inevitably about class relations. At this early point one wonders already why Graeber should set his cards so exclusively on exchange theory.

Graeber builds in particular on the historical/archaeological research of Moses Finley and Michael Hudson—though these key authors are, again, hidden away in endnotes rather than discussed in detail. Why? Is this a concession to a broad readership? Finley and Hudson work from an eclectic mix of Maussian-Polanyian and Marxian traditions. But Graeber’s next step is driven exclusively by exchange theory, extending the Maussian line while shedding the Marxian one. Thus, modes of morality are ontologically severed from modes of production. From here on any meaningful conversation between them is stymied.

He then introduces three different “moral principles of exchange”, which are supposed to be exhaustive of the possibilities: (1) “(baseline) communism”, (2) “exchange” (I will call this “market” because the other two forms are also supposed to be forms of exchange; I also prefer “market” because Graeber’s category of “exchange” presupposes the freedom and individualism that is essential for the possibility of a short-term contract), and (3) “hierarchy”. These are, I repeat, “moral principles”: Graeber ac-
knowledges that they do not describe whole empirical societies: pure forms do not occur. But, he does assume that in a certain time and place the one or the other will be dominant and generalized. That dominant principle will then be amalgamated with the other two principles, which are then submerged and confined to circumscribed spheres of social interaction.

Graeber says that in one way or another communist principles operate among all in-groups. They organize what these groups share and what unites them, what makes them durable over time and what strengthens the interdependencies between the parts. This is about mutualism, the basis of sociality, Graeber posits. Communism, Graeber explains, has nothing to do with the old myth of common property that supposedly reigned in a golden age of “primitive communism” before the fall of man, and then again after the socialist revolution; a myth by which Marxism, with its obsessions with property, was fatedly afflicted, he claims. Instead, communism is a form of sociality and morality that takes the idea of “to each according to their needs and from each according to their abilities” seriously (94–102). Paradoxically, this is a very Marxist formulation, and one cannot but wonder what sort of property structures and political formations—modes of production—are required to make that satisfaction of needs according to ability possible. Logically, one cannot expect this communist morality to be dominant where robust private property or private political control prevails, either de jure or de facto.

Graeber’s “market” moralities of exchange (what he terms “exchange”) assume equality between people who enter voluntarily into contracts with each other. Such market contracts are of limited durability, and all participants presumably gain from the interaction. This is a deeply liberal conception (but see below on Islam). Often, Graeber emphasizes, market moralities rely on some “baseline communism” for them to work and be trusted. However, just as important but not discussed by Graeber, is that they are always embedded, too, in particular forms of “hierarchy”. Some of the market moralities that Graeber describes are actually profoundly pervaded by moralities of authority and obedience. That is true for all the expansive trade empires, from the Roman Empire to the American one, but also for the market moralities nurtured in China, for example. In fact, the proper relationship between markets and hierarchies is what has kept whole academic disciplines like law and economics busy. It has also kept David Harvey busy (see below).

“Hierarchy”, for Graeber, is where fundamental and juridical inequality reigns, determined by “custom”. Kings guarantee justice and cosmological order while peasants are supposed to labor on the land and pay taxes. Brahmins maintain the ritual purity of the overall structure while untouchables deal with the dirt. I note that modern bureaucracy and the modern state is not part of this notion of hierarchy at all. Graeber’s hierarchy seems defined by supranatural legitimations. It is about theologically grounded authority, or minimally “traditional authority” in Weber’s sense. All in all, Graeber’s definition of market and of hierarchy seems to leave the whole of the modern capitalist state out. A puzzling limitation for an intellectual intervening in the politics of late capitalist popular indebtedness.

Apart from these conceptual concerns, there are two methodological issues with this approach that I need to highlight. The first is that for Graeber these moralities of exchange are not just the socialities of microinteractions, but also the large-scale reigning mythologies of whole social formations. There is a regular slip between these two very different scales in the text. The idea of moral principles is quite useful when we are dealing with microlevel interactions in which the actors, the motives, the gains, and the outcomes can be unambiguously observed (see, e.g., Zigon 2008). This is well testified by all the anthropologies of morality that have been produced lately—though they deal generally with many more possible and more situated moral modes than Graeber’s three stylized principles. More abstract moral principles can easily be uncovered in philosophical tracts and discussions (which offer much of the em-
pirical material for *Debt*), often in blurred and sometimes in pure form. But when discussing whole societies and their systematic social relationships such as of class, patriarchy, or empire, moral discourses can also literally be the dominant social mythologies that hide more than they reveal about “social reality”. Modes of morality regularly serve as the ideologies of modes of production, both obscuring and expressing ruling-class interests by making them seem universal and self-evident. Indeed, strange for an anarchist, Graeber is not keen on distinguishing moralities from ruling ideologies. Mauss here clearly prevails over Kropotkin, and indeed over so many Marxists.

Markets based on “equality”? Not only Marxists would fall off their chairs. Yes, formal juridical and civil (liberal) or human (Islam) equality, as we know. But as Marx famously quipped, “Under equals force decides.” And so equality turns out to be a key ideological trope of liberal societies. The proceeds of market-based exchanges between equal citizens (including corporations) are in practice systematically unequal because the positions of participants to the transaction are often fundamentally unequal and dissimilar, in particular in those market-type societies that are somehow capitalist. There is no “level playing field”. One key form of exchange in market societies is the exchange of labor power for a wage. Little choice here for those who do not have access to the resources that are necessary for their daily survival, as Marx taught us: they have to sell and do so immediately, whether they like the current conditions of the contract or not. This is just as true for small market-oriented peasants as for small merchants, and indeed for households, as they purchase the goods or hire the shelter they need. This facilitates exploitation within “the hidden abode of production”, which is Marx’s key issue. But it also makes exploitation and extraction possible outside of production, such as through credit, advances, debt, rents, corvée, prices, and the public debt. This has increasingly become David Harvey’s point (see below). Instead of civil or human equality plus voluntary exchange on free markets, we arrive then at class rule, capitalist or whatever. And we shift accordingly from modes of morality as ideology to an analysis of modes of production as reality. And we shift from moral dilemmas and paradoxes to social and historical contradictions.

We can anticipate one line of defense open to Graeber: what I just said obviously describes modern capitalism. Capitalism, for Graeber, and not for him alone, is a hybrid between hierarchy and markets. Capitalism is a durable alliance between states and capital holders, not the sort of short-term horizontal market transaction described in Graeber’s definition. But which society is then actually described by that market-based definition? And if the whole of capitalism is not somehow realistically captured in any of his three modes of morality, do we not miss something quite essential for analysis and politics? Are these ideal types not too much up in the air for them to be useful at all? My sense is that Graeber’s modes willingly prelude on the myths to the neglect of the realities.

Similar contradictions underlie Graeber’s “communist” and “hierarchical” moralities. An anthropological locus classicus is of course the struggle within communist tribes and lineages between generations and among different clans, motivated by the notion that the communist pretensions are squandered by the incumbent elders or chiefs, who are turning themselves and their kin into durable proto state classes or ethnocapitalists. Next to sharing, kinship remains a great vehicle for exploitation in many parts of the world, motivated by “love, honor, and duty”. Nor is friendship free of such tendencies. Graeber would certainly not deny this. He would probably point to the idealized nature of his modes. Or perhaps he would point out that such failures of the communist mode of morality are the consequence of the “articulation between modes of production”, the corruptions of mutuality by capitalist or hierarchical encroachments. In such replies the lack of realism is acknowledged, however. Baseline communism remains a desire more than a factual practice.

It was precisely Marx’s goal in the critique of political economy to demystify such mythologies and discover the class rule and class rela-
tionships behind and within them. Here, it seems to me, we are not only back amid the old discussions around Proudhon, Marx, Bakunin, Lenin, the Narodniki, and the early reformists and “social patriots” such as Mauss. We have also arrived at an old discussion in anthropology. Graeber’s teacher, Marshall Sahlins, has been criticized for concentrating on “mytho-practice” to the detriment of unfolding social relations, and indeed literally for overlooking property relations and power in his early discussions of primitive communism (“the domestic/familial mode of production”) and his later thoughts on capitalism (1974, 1978). The critiques came from Marxists such as Friedman (1988) and Godelier (1977). Graeber’s moral principles of exchange, similarly, are in fact mytho-practices that obscure the systematic social divisions of property and class power. The reason why Debt could become such a popular read—the microstories and the macrophilosophical speculations—may also be the reason why the macro social structures remain so frustratingly nebulous, and why the relevant theoretical discussions with other authors never happen.

But these very substantial problems of realism become still further magnified. While he acknowledges that his three categories of moral principles—communism, markets, hierarchy—are not meant to describe actual societies, Graeber proceeds to deploy them to distinguish actual full-blown world-historical epochs from each other, both conceptually and in the structure of his chapters. Thus, he moves from (1) moral principles of microexchange to (2) the dominant ideologies of whole societies to (3) the dominant mythologies of whole historical blocs in human history. This, then, is mytho-practice in jumbo form.

Which are these epochs? Here, not surprisingly, Graeber is exceptionally creative and sweeping. Taking inspiration from Karl Jaspers’s notion of the “axial age”, and using it in a perfectly idiosyncratic way as far as I am aware, he sees one singular world-spanning historical sequence in which the experiences of particular world regions such as China, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe are more or less synchronized, albeit with significant empirical variations. World history is summarized as a sequence of two secular cycles that run from hierarchy to market and back again. The first phase of hierarchy plays itself out between circa 3000–500 BC; from 500 BC to circa AD 600 there is a general worldwide breakthrough to markets, the proper “axial age”; from AD 600 to 1200 human society reverts back to hierarchy; after which market principles become gradually dominant again. The last cycle is not completed yet, as we are waiting for the third coming of hierarchy—the king born from the “liberated spaces” of everyday communism.

Recall that moral principles of exchange occur in practice in blurred forms. Indeed, on closer scrutiny all societies that extol market principles of exchange turn out to be heavily imbued by hierarchy, indeed, imperial hierarchy. In Graeber’s vision markets are historically first produced by metropolitan, militarized empires driven by the accumulation of metals, slaves, and soldiers. Such metropolitan empires are massively violent, disruptive of social bonds, and extractive. The classical example is Rome. In these imperially driven market phases, inequality grows and debt proliferates. Lenders are free to indulge in usury, and they take serfs and slaves as collateral. These are slave-amassing urban empires.

Hierarchy re-emerges in response to the uprooting and disembedding associated with these violent market-driven phases. Hierarchy is called in from below by religious movements—proliferating from the year zero onward, if not earlier—and from above in the form of bureaucratically and theologically designed legal systems that re-regulate relations of inequality, in particular the associated usury and slave taking, starting in Rome with the reign of August. The emerging religious hierarchies gradually channel metals and accumulation out of the cities, the markets, and the militaries back into temples and divine orders. And they restore patriarchy on a macro scale and on the everyday scale of family and kinship as well. They do so by prohibiting creditors from charging interest
or taking slaves if fathers cannot repay debts and by subduing women, mothers, and daughters to a male paternal authority that cannot legally be suspended by creditors or superiors. The world religions are therefore without exception patriarchal and often misogynic. As Graeber characteristically quips, they embody the millennial voices of the male dispossessed begging for honor. Graeber calls this renewed epoch of hierarchy the “global middle ages”.

China, according to Graeber, is the world location from which this jumbo-historical rhythm is best perceived. China is the only place where bureaucrats with preaxial origins were smart and strong enough to prevent the violent extremes of pure market dominance or pure hierarchy. South Asia, in contrast, is exceptional for its extreme forms of ruralized hierarchy after an initial vibrant urban and apparently uniquely violent market phase. Europe and the Mediterranean, too, are exceptional for their market-imperial extremism during the antique period and the modern period, and for the extreme feudal reaction against those violent markets in between. The Middle East is where the purest principles of free market exchange were inscribed, according to Graeber. This is because Islam did not favor the classic collusion of bureaucrats, militarists, and urban merchants that drove market imperialism in South Asia and in Europe and the Mediterranean.

The historical chapters (9–12) are ordered in line with this overarching world-historical rhythm. There is a chapter on “the axial age”, one on the “global middle ages”, one on “the great capitalist empires”, and one on “the post-1971 beginning of something new”. Not surprisingly, the “global middle ages” may well be the most exciting chapter; it is where the global phase of hierarchy and world religion in reaction to imperial market-driven violence is discussed. In a sense the onus of the whole argument rests on this chapter. Graeber has to be very versatile and imaginative with his categories, as obviously there is a lot of regional and religious variation to pack under that one rubric of hierarchy. And indeed, amid all the ideal-typical, jumbo mytho-practical construction, this is where inevitably a measure of unfortunately nontheorized historical realism must sneak in.

Crucially, when explaining (somewhat) more precisely the actual historical trajectories of transformation and development in East and South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe during the “global middle ages”, Graeber shifts tack and accounts for them largely in terms of the variable realist alliances of classes of bureaucrats, merchants, feudal lords, and militarists that drove them—as he does later in his chapter on the capitalist empires. But he shifts tack in complete silence so that these historically realist accounts never invite a re-examination of what the “moral principles of exchange” approach can and cannot deliver. Sharply stated, there is an implicit (eclectic) class analysis in the macrohistorical chapters of the book that does in fact most of the narrative and indeed all of the explanatory work. That must be so, because the more synchronic perspective on “moralties”, both of the micro and the jumbo kind, does not offer leverage in explaining actual histories, transitions, social struggles, trajectories, and transformations. Graeber needs Marx (and Weber) as soon as synchronic moral philosophizing and mytho-practice give way to dynamic explanation. But Graeber never organizes an appropriate ceremony to call realist class analysis back in (one is tempted to say: no gift to the Marxists). And while he leaves his Marx in sullen subservience to a superinflated Mauss, he refuses to deploy his analysis of class contradictions consistently and switches regularly to the ideational dilemmas of mytho-practice.

This becomes obvious, for example, in his discussion of Buddhism and Islam, two religions that actually originate with smaller merchants and which center, therefore, significantly, like Graeber’s theory of exchange itself, on the question of the morality of horizontal transactions, on money, credit, debt, and patriarchy. For a mytho-practical approach, Buddhism and Islam have the added advantage that they also prescribe their underlying social forms and interactions somehow more thoroughly than Christianity or Confucianism could ever do. The latter must utilize more “muddled” moral prin-
ciples if only for the more complex class relationships of the agrarian societies in which they became accommodated. But more importantly, Graeber does not truly discuss these religions as forms of territorial rule. He concentrates on their “movement phase”. This is where the mytho-practical optic surely works best: that is, like with anarchism itself, as a prefigurative discourse in which social reality mainly enters in the figure of the moral enemy, but not as a series of hard social constraints or complex historical fields of power in which even their own conditions of possibility are given. As a consequence, the discussion of Buddhism and Islam feels often like a story about “islands of history”, mythical representations that are sufficient unto themselves, not yet touched by the corrupting forces of power and rule. Thus, Islam comes out unproblematically as “the world’s first popular free market ideology” (2011: 278), and the bazaar as a genuine site of freedom and morality. No interest charged over loans, only genuine entrepreneurial cunning rewarded. No oligopoly here, no corruption, and the state fundamentally and suspiciously kept at bay. The explanation of why, despite the copresence at the end of the Ottoman Caliphate of very wealthy banker-entrepreneur families, deep urban and regional markets, and extensive long-distance linkages, there was no internal transition to capitalism: merchants “took their free market ideology seriously,” just a handshake and a glance at heaven. Surely “this made most of the (capitalist) finance and insurance that were later to develop in Europe impossible” (2011: 303). No discussion of the large-scale cotton and textile industries in Egypt and India around 1800, and a simple equation of capitalism with state-enabled high interest rates and capitalist corporations. In the chapter on the European capitalist empires, predictably, Martin Luther and his righteous plea for high interest rates on savings and loans similarly plays a key role.

Issues of money and debt, including the philosophical speculations to which they give rise, are the supposed drivers of Graeber’s epochs of dominant “moral principles” as well as the reasons (but not really the “factors”) behind the transition to other epochs. But David Graeber needs actors to set the dramas in motion, actors that do not come out of the blue but act and express themselves within particular social relations. A downplayed version of class theory is brought in regularly when a realist explanation of a territorial-cum-philosophical outcome must be accounted for. Marxist anthropology and social history always assumed and tried to show that these actors and these relations could be made somehow transparent through the language of class. The configuration of classes (which were of course blurred, but not more than Graeber’s modes of morality) was imagined to be anchored in particular historical modes of production. Such classical Marxist modes of production rested on certain property forms and on the deployment and exploitation of labor. Class was the linking concept. Class was what roughly explained how social structures worked and why transitions occurred in the way they occurred. Marx identified capitalist, feudal, Asiatic, antique, and communist modes of production by the prevalent forms of the exploitation of labor: wages, rents, corvées, serfdom, slavery. Eric Wolf (1982) reduced these five modes to three: kin-based, redistributive, and capitalist. At first glance this comes uncannily close to Graeber’s three modes of morality, except that Graeber replaces capitalism with market principles (“exchange”, in his words). The underlying difference is that Wolf’s modes of production are meant to describe realistic “key social relationships” (ibid.: 72–101) that shape actual territorialized livelihoods, societies, and histories, while Graeber’s modes operate on the level of moral mythologies. That is also why capitalism cannot figure systematically in his account: capitalism is not a mythology but a historical and relational reality, one that does not like to reveal itself too openly to the many. It has therefore always come wrapped in a loud mythology: the free market, a key trope associated with a series of further tropes such as free contract, economic growth, civil society, democracy, development, and the middle classes. Marx, Wolf, and Graeber know all of this. Wolf and Graeber also agree that capitalism emerges
as a peculiar alliance between state bureaucrats and capital holders. What they all show is that capitalism is not as “free” as it says it is. In Wolf’s scheme capitalism only starts in the nineteenth century, with the dominance of the factory system. This has long been recognized as a Marxist piety. Graeber, along with Arrighi, Braudel, Friedman, Banaji, and Harvey, makes clear that capitalism has a much longer historical reach and that that reach rests, among others, on the historically transformative role of finance and credit instruments (see below).

But instead of taking that as his key issue and concentrating on the historical-cultural class struggles that were and are involved, Graeber gets lost in schematized mythologies that don’t fit easily. Interesting mythologies, very engaging accounts, even. There is a lot to learn and a lot to enjoy here. But the outcome is a theoretical and historical potpourri in which both Marxism and capitalism disappear as anything more than secondary or tertiary phenomena, while the city tends to appear largely as an inevitable inferno of enslavement. Worryingly for a book about debt in history, there is also little sense of systematic class structures. The accumulation of debt appears almost as the result of bad luck, the accumulation of property and wealth as mazzel. There is also little systematic attention for the actual ways in which people reproduce themselves in all these societies. There are a lot of peasants in the book, quite a few artisans, and by the end also some wageworkers, but these categories carry hardly any analytic weight. Everyone seems to be just loosely running around in this book. The only substantial conclusion is that market-plus-hierarchy is over time not good for popular majorities. In The Democracy Project, too, Graeber shows little patience for the daily labor of contemporary US citizens—he tends to wave it away as boring wage slavery. Spatialized aspects of class and modes of production are also left out of the discussion. The older explanations of metropolitan collapse in Eurasia after AD 500 in terms of the growing military power of pastoralists in Central Asia are not discussed; nor are the well-known spatial-ecological explanations of the class relationships underlying Islam in terms of the balances of power among Berbers, urban traders, and imperial rulers in the long arid band stretching from Central Asia to Morocco.

For David Graeber this all seems of secondary importance—“mere history”; perhaps—as compared to his schematized preoccupation with mythologies of exchange. Is the neglect of all these theoretical and historical issues the price you should be willing to pay if you seek to reach a large popular audience? Or is, rather, this scholarly neglect necessary if your real mission is not the mere writing of a learned treatise but persuading your native American audience that what they have been cherishing throughout is not so much “communities” or “families”, as the mainstream has it, but in fact “everyday communism”? And that what local mythology has revealed to you as the free market is in fact monopoly rooted in “corporate imperialism”, a monster that is out to enslave us all? Was this not precisely what the American Revolution had once sought to thwart and what its sacred Constitution had pictured as the ultimate ungodly enemy? Debt is indeed an intervention in American cosmologies that is meant to invert and to shock. If so, despite all the theoretical loss, chapeau! And I mean it. Debt must first of all be read as an extremely shrewd intervention in the politics of American mythologies. But in that case, “we”, as a world community of scholars and researchers, have a duty to reclaim our global theoretical commons—a commons that apparently had to be sacrificed for a while on behalf of a brooding American people’s insurgency.

David Harvey: Urban “commonist”

Harvey, in The Enigma of Capital (2011) and Rebel Cities (2012), as in his whole work, engages head-on precisely those issues that Graeber seeks to evade throughout his world-historical flight toward epochal moral modes: capitalism, class, urban process and space, and of course Marx. Amid that difference of terrain, though, Harvey and Graeber do share an impor-
tant point on their compasses: both argue that the notion of “communism” should be extricat-
ed from the overgrowth of classical Marxism. As we have seen, for Graeber this wrangling with Marx—about “baseline communism”—is worth just a short passage, albeit one that goes on to shape his entire conceptual framework. Harvey, in contrast, develops this discussion at length in a sustained dialogue with Capital, as he has done in earlier work. Since Harvey has been writing for four decades now, and has been rather consistent, I assume I will need less detail here than in my discussion of Graeber.

Harvey’s communism, like Graeber’s, is an everyday communism, not one confined to the utopian end phase after the revolution when all the “theft of private property” has been undone. Note that this hints at a significant anarchist victory over classical Marxism, one that probably reflects a stark contemporary structure of feeling. It underlines the current predominance of prefigurative modes of imagining utopias rooted in the here and now as against the evolutionist nineteenth-century utopias that expected relief from suffering and exploitation in a far-away future of freedom. But rather than a code and a sphere of morality, as in Graeber, Harvey’s baseline communism is a social force that tends to arise, inevitably, within the empirical institutional domains of modern urban capitalist society. These are the domains that regulate and govern urban life and space. Harvey’s communism both animates and springs from the actually existing urban commons around (potentially) collective resources and institutions that thrive in cities. Harvey agrees with Hardt and Negri, who see “the metropolis as a vast commons produced by the collective labor expended on and in the city” (Harvey 2012: 78). But Harvey goes further and turns the substantive form into a verb: “commoning”, the active making and claiming of commons, or the protection thereof against enclosures and appropriations (see also Susser and Tonnelat 2013; Kalb 2014). Such commoning takes as its targets not only the privileges attached to private property, but also those of public property and public capacities if captured for private or state accumulation, including space and time. This is about rights of use, access, and control, a call for radicalizing urban citizenship and democracy. It is also a struggle over the contents and workings of institutions, from labor markets to education, housing, transport, public space, and so on. At first glance this seems primarily a radical liberal agenda, but Harvey time and again explains that this is very much about class struggle and anticapitalist mobilization. How so?

It would seem enough to give an empirical answer and say that minimum wages, benefits, health, leisure, social housing, and all classical labor things are part of this urban commons and are objects of commoning. But there is a more fundamental vision behind this, and that vision involves a substantial rethinking of the Marxist conceptions of capitalism, class, and the proletariat; an urban rethinking, of course, in the line of Lefebvre. I will be brief.

Recall that for Marx, and for Eric Wolf and the structural Marxists of the 1970s, capitalism depended on the historical appearance of “surplus labor production”. Capitalism was defined by a double emergence: the rise of a “free” proletariat that was fully dependent on selling its labor power on the market, plus the ensuing “penetration of capital into the sphere of production”. That proletariat was then exploited within what Marx called the “hidden abode of production”—hidden because now enclosed, literally and legally, in between the factory walls—by not being paid the full equivalent of its productivity. The difference between what it got and what it produced was the property of the capitalist, and this went either as investment into further accumulation or into the capitalist’s personal wealth. The part that went into further accumulation inevitably accelerated the “tendency of the rate of profit to fall”, as markets became saturated and crises of overaccumulation set in, crises that in Marx’s age were happening very frequently. Capitalism was always on the brink of a “realization crisis”: purchasing power by definition tended to be lower than the sum total of its productive capacities. This is the “system” that Marx discovered in Capital, a sys-
tem rooted in the contradictory “universalities” of production.

In particular in *A Companion to Marx’s Capital, Volume 2* (2013), Harvey takes Marx to task for separating this law-like system from what Marx thought were the “particularities and singularities” of distribution, consumption, and credit. In fact, Marx in the course of writing *Capital* during the 1860s and 1870s began separating out “universalist production” from the wider relational whole of a mode of production that he had first outlined in the *Grundrisse* (1857) and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). He did so, in fact, against the spirit of his analysis of the workday in *Capital, Volume 1*. Marx now sought to ban these particularities from his overall analysis, just like the economists he was criticizing. The particularities, however, continuously entered into the workings and tendencies of the supposed universalities, now as then. Moreover, they are perpetually the objects of cultural expectations and social struggle and become therefore after Marx’s time ever more the object of state management. Harvey concludes that Marx, in particular in *Capital, Volume 2*, by prioritizing supposed universalities over particularities, may have been too willing to conform to the reigning scientism of his day (as of this day). It is a willingness that led to recurrent impasses in Marx’s time ever more the object of state management. Harvey brilliantly demonstrates in his *Companion*.

With this fundamental move, Harvey obviously (re)inserts history, politics, and mobilization into the center of the analysis. Not just the politics of labor but those of capital as well. Just as important, this lifts the locus of capitalist extraction out of its solitary confinement within the sphere of production and extends it to the conditions, modalities, and workings of credit, distribution, and consumption, and in fact to the circulation of capital as a whole, to the full domain of social reproduction. This is where classically, in Harvey, the urban process enters, as well as time and space. The urban process is fundamentally based in credit. Capitalist surpluses are pooled in the credit system. Credit is the “collective capital” of the capitalist class as a whole. Credit allows for expanded consumption (in the short term), thus postponing the imminent realization crisis while “banking on future growth”. But in the expectation of rents and profits further down the line it also flows, speculatively, into the development of new capitalist landscapes, new urban forms, new technologies, new production arrangements, new consumption, new forms of everyday life—Hausmann and the Pereire brothers in Paris are the emblems—and, most important of all, into the public debt. To put it simply, the state is deeply involved here from the beginning to the end. The public debt is guaranteed by the capitalist state and by the central bank, as is the value and the availability of the currency and the functioning and solvency of the private parts of the banking system. What Harvey calls the “state-finance nexus” may therefore well be the key capitalist relationship. Harvey speaks about the “central nervous system” of capital accumulation (2011: 52), and about the public debt as its main mechanism. The state-finance nexus is thus of similar momentous importance for the development of capitalist societies as the direct exploitation of labor in production, and closely aligned with it (as I argued in my analysis of the “Anglo-Dutch moment” of 1688 [Kalb 2013]; see also Wolf’s [1982] and Graeber’s (2011) characterization of capitalism as an alliance of merchants and bureaucrats). The public debt at its core is regulative, speculative, and extractive. It regulates the accumulation of the “collective capital of the capitalist class” and projects it speculatively into new social futures and new spaces based on the assumption of renewed growth and accumulation. The state debt is in fact the floor upon which the whole temple of modern capitalist calculation and expectation is built and where the overall conditions for the reproduction of capital are laid down and secured. Eurozone leaders have recently discovered this fundamental fact, to their complete surprise—as good neoliberals, they predictably thought it was “markets”. The public debt is also where rent taking and profit making become entirely blurred.
With the conceptual crux of capital being shifted from the point of production in the direction of credit and the public debt, indeed to the circulation of capital as a whole, ideas of class and the proletariat must of course be shifting along. The working classes, then, for Harvey, become all those who are working for a wage and paying taxes, rents, mortgages, prices, and so forth, and not just the factory proletariat. Exploitation and extraction happens at all points of transaction, and not just at the moment that they sell their labor power. More fundamentally, capital formation and exploitation are far from epitomized in any of those individual transactions that are the daily bread of economists (as they are in Graeber's "exchange"). They are embedded in the precontractual conditions of social life, the structural conditions and the strategic relations, if you like. Capitalism, for Harvey, can best be defined as a state-managed system of private control over the production and distribution of the social surplus. Capital-driven urbanization, including the periodic dispossession of populations, the building of new urban spaces, and the decline of older ones, is the modern life-form that over time and beyond any individual transactions sustains this system. The urban life-form, and the key relationships and institutions that undergird it, comes therefore ontologically before any individual transaction. Capitalism in short is a society, not a mere economy. “Capitalist class domination,” writes Harvey, is exerted “not only over the state apparatus but also over whole populations—their lifestyles as well as their labor power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of the world. The city and the urban process that produces it are therefore major sites of political, social, and class struggles” (2011: 66). While capitalist classes must struggle for space relations that allow them to impose growth and extract rents and profits reliably, subaltern populations in manifold ways seek a measure of control over their habitats and the sites of extraction as they are simultaneously getting bent to the requirements of capital. Harvey's urban working class then comes close in practice to the old idea of “the people” (see also Dean 2012), while class formation is both expanded in empirical scope and bolstered as the conceptual bedrock on which the whole analysis hinges. This conceptual bedrock in particular also includes the formation and reformation of capitalist classes and class segments, formed in ever-changing and “necessary” class struggles from above. The core question of counterpolitics then becomes what “the people” think and do as they are time and again confronted by class-conscious ruling classes that are pushed by “the system” to abandon earlier implicit social contracts around life, place, and labor.

Harvey's urban life-form inevitably generates the urban commons as it brings people together in places manifestly sustained by their collective labor. But the urban commons is not merely the empirical sum of the shared spatial and institutional resources available to the people. These are “liminal spaces of possibility” (2012: xv). In fact, it is a verb rather than a substantive, as we have seen. Conceptually, the urban commons is Harvey's equivalent of the class capacities of the classic factory proletariat in Marxism. As with the classic proletariat, the capacity for solidary action is given in principle by the spatial concentration of people and activities, including the common interests, commonalities, and solidarities that will arise in an everyday life that is produced by their collective labor. But at the same time, used in a “conscious and concerted way”, these capacities for commoning can be enlarged and solidified and used forcefully to make enforceable claims. But there is a crucial difference with Marx's proletariat. That proletariat occupied an “objective class position in a universalist system of production” expressed by “scientific socialism” as an objective reflection. We can now understand that this idea was based on the illusion of leaving all the historical “particularities and singularities” out. Such an objectivist position makes no sense for Harvey's urban commons. The old Hegelian dialectic between class in and for itself is therefore fundamentally disabled, at least in its purely objective and subjective poles. What we get in Harvey is a much more blurred and very com-
plex set of ongoing historically situated and emplaced class struggles about life, place, and labor, where the relationships and institutional arrangements themselves generate the possibilities and the insights for counterpolitics. Consequently, like in Gramsci’s idea of the subaltern, Harvey must have a much keener appreciation of the complex and indeed contradictory forces of populism and the possibility that populism can be an expression of, a claim within, and a weapon for the ongoing commoning against capital’s enclosures. Such claims can be informal and self-evident, based in “folkways”, “customs”, and “rights”, or, with a bit of help from the “discontented middle classes”, be made formal and explicit as a collective political program for struggle and bargaining. *Enigma* and *Rebel Cities* describe numerous historical examples of this sort of populist commoning in response to class-conscious capitalist classes, with *Enigma* putting the emphasis on the latter and *Rebel Cities* on the former.

Thus, the formal agreements among Harvey’s and Graeber’s communisms run surprisingly deep. Both communisms linger as a basic and always already-present property, however inarticulate, of everyday life. Both are also immanent possibilities, moral and relational counterpoints to the logics of capital, baselines from which popular claims can be formulated, solidarities forged, revolutions prefigured and enacted. Both visions picture the rise of a “democratic king”, a collective agency that can subdue the accumulation of capital to the needs of humanity (equality and freedom) and the globe (ecological survival).

But the substantial differences are not less significant. Graeber’s communism is nurtured from the capitalist outside, the uncorrupted moral economies of the free spaces. It is a “natural” dehistoricized carte blanche that seems to express itself primarily in alternations of dignified small-circle refusal and *indignado* mass occupation. Harvey’s communism, in contrast, arises from the heart of urban capitalism itself, is not wild or pure but embedded in real historical processes and relationships, waxing and waning on the rhythm of permanent urban class struggle within and around the various capitalist nexuses—above all, perhaps, the state-finance nexus.

Up to this point, I find Harvey’s argumentation both historically and conceptually rich, coherent, and persuasive. It also shows exactly what space is left empty by Graeber’s anarchism and moralities approach—even though the mode of production is never fully reinstalled on the pedestal that it occupied in the Marxism of the 1960s and 1970s. The texts also leave no doubts of why it is important for a discipline such as anthropology to accept the need for sustained theorization beyond its obsession with local particularisms. However, at the next stage in the argument, Harvey starts to write in a much looser way. This is where he delves into time and space at a level well below his overall theoretical discussion with Marx and capitalism. He allows himself a rather loose narrative mode that stands in contrast with the robust coherence of his overall approach. In *Enigma* and *Rebel Cities* it seems almost as if theory can only operate seriously at a meta level; the rest is “mere narrative histories”. Although Harvey has never been an avid reader of the sociologies and anthropologies of contentious politics, it occurs to me that this is somehow different from his earlier work. Perhaps, as in Graeber, a concession to a larger public? Or rather, a consequence of trying to keep up as a public intellectual—one who happens to maintain a serious academic agenda “on the side”—with the recent acceleration of time and space around the high tides of the crises (2008–2011) and the hot spots of the rebellions (2011–2014)?

If the state-finance nexus is where capital is assembled (chap. 2), Harvey’s seven distinct “spheres of co-evolution” is where that capital is subsequently set to “evolve” (2011: 123). These spheres comprise (1) techno-organizational forms, (2) social relations, (3) institutional and administrative arrangements, (4) production and labor processes, (5) relations to nature, (6) social reproduction of the species and reproduction in everyday life, and (7) mental conceptions. The status of these seven spheres is not clear, nor is the sequence itself. He also uses dif-
ferent labels at different moments. Moreover, “mental conceptions” and “social relations” seem to me inevitably part of any of these spheres, and vice versa. I would argue that the clue for a genuine relational approach is the refusal to separate such basic theoretical dimensions out from each other as if they were empirical domains (Kalb 1997). “Techno-organizational forms”, “institutional and administrative arrangements”, and “production and labor processes”, too, may not always be so clearly differentiated, either, empirically as well as conceptually, and may actually “express and enact” wider social relations-cum-mental conceptions. The seven “spheres of co-evolution” feel a bit like Borges’s “Chinese system of classification”.

While Harvey sees a lot of uneven development among these spheres, it is essential, says Harvey, to see that they do nevertheless form a “totality” or an “ensemble”. His own term for that is “structured coherence” (2011: 123), a notion stemming from his more strictly urban work in the 1980s. We clearly come close to the “structural articulation” of Althusser and Godelier here. But “structured coherence” operates on levels well below the mode of production as a whole, often referring to relationships within urban regions rather than at the country or state level. It also has a distinctly more flexible and historical touch than the earlier concepts of “totality” and “articulation” and seems to leave more space for contradictions within the ensemble, not least because of its programmatic openness to multiscalar visions.

These “spheres of co-evolution” are the fields through which capital develops its rule and dominance, but they also form the conditions as well as the targets for processes of commoning. The social effectivity of capital requires crucial parts of them to be enclosed and geared to accumulation. But they inevitably also become common domains, as well as domains that offer the resources for further commoning. Harvey explains that any alternative to capital¬ism, and any movements that are dedicated to developing such alternatives, need to grapple with and struggle within each of these spheres. They also need to find alliances with move¬ments struggling in and with other spheres. Ultimately they need to design not just alternative arrangements within each and every sphere, but they also need alternative forms of coherence among them. The power and effectiveness of the left, according to Harvey, depends on the links it can develop between these historically diverse arenas of struggle. He criticizes “historical socialism” for having failed to nurture those links sufficiently—having been largely focused on production and labor issues—and to design a comprehensive alternative for capitalist society. He similarly points out that anarchist horizontalism acts only within one of these spheres, the sphere of everyday life, and what he calls “solidarity economies”.

And then, finally, there is the all-important spatial aspect. “Socialism in one city” is not more conceivable than “socialism in one country”, as Harvey points out. Capitalism creates new debt-funded space relations all the time. It generates new urban landscapes, restructures its existing spatial fixes, and is by now running a practically globe-spanning value regime. Each local ensemble is multiply articulated with differently constituted and differentially specialized ensembles elsewhere. Here again a nod to the structural Marxism of the 1970s—“articulation of modes of production”—and to world systems theory, though Harvey’s vision of capitalist space is much more dynamic and differentiated, and indeed more urban-based, than these older anti-imperial perspectives on uneven and combined development. Any serious alternative to capitalism will therefore need to come up with a sophisticated “foreign policy”, a vision of global coordination that can substitute for capitalist coordination and “undermine and eventually overthrow the capitalist laws of value on the world market” (2012: 153). Any alternative must be internationalist. In this regard, too, are most contemporary movements failing us, according to Harvey. OWS, the indignado uprisings, and the antiausterity mobilizations in Europe lately have often been disappointingly localist and nationalist, even as compared to the preceding wave of alterglobalist movements of the early 2000s. Perhaps this is a corollary of the
dominant anarchism and horizontalism within them, forsaking (like anthropology itself) global visions in favor of a preoccupation with everyday life. This also connects to the absence of space relations in Graeber’s anarchism. Outside the old West, one can hardly congratulate the Arab uprisings or the Bulgarian (2013), Romanian (2012–2013), and Bosnian (2014) mobilizations, let alone the spectacular Ukrainian insurgency, with a sophisticated anticapitalist internationalism.

Harvey, in Rebel Cities, shows great interest in El Alto, Bolivia, as an example of the sort of commoning that he sees as the future of urban class struggle. He also lauds the anthropologies of that city by Lesley Gill (2000) and Sian Lazar (2008), on which he bases himself. What can we learn from El Alto, and why is Graeber just as enchanted as Harvey is? In what sense does El Alto prefigure the reunification of Marxism and anarchism in anthropology? The answer to the latter question is in fact straightforward: permanent dual power based on a radical populist mobilization that connects work, life, and territory and claims genuine anticapitalist cultural alterity. A nested set of corporate, territorial/neighborhood, and labor/trade organizations in El Alto serve to keep up almost continuous mobilization through assemblies, demonstrations, processions, festivals, and folk happenings. They are exerting uninterrupted pressure on their democratically elected delegates, many of whom can be replaced easily if the “base” wishes so. This includes in a sense even “their” own president of Bolivia, Evo Morales—former head of the former tin miners’ union. The story of its emergence as a rebel city is too complex to tell here, but it cannot be divorced from El Alto’s very recent history as an informal suburban settlement zone for two distinct groups: dispossessed peasants from the altiplano with ethno-corporate traditions and former tin miners with strong Trotskyist-cum-anarchosyndicalist traditions from Potosí. Nor can it be disconnected from the hardships both groups faced in losing livelihoods in the hinterlands and building up new lives near La Paz. It is the alliance between these groups, including the alignment of their histories within an ongoing confrontation with a neoliberal and transnationalized capitalist state, that produced this radically subversive outcome. In that confrontation its location vis-à-vis all transport routes from the altiplano to La Paz played an important tactical role. Harvey compares the radical populism of El Alto with Paris before the Paris Commune; another comparison would be St. Petersburg in 1917–1920. The overlap of neighborhood associations and labor organizations was essential, as was the incorporation of these organizations into a whole folk economy of informal work and petty commodity production. In El Alto’s context, a vibrant ethnopolulism was produced that defines itself in ongoing cultural confrontation with the bourgeois mestizo state, whose capital lies literally down the cliff at its feet.

Graeber, in his short description of the rebellion, seems to overlook a crucial point that Lazar makes and Harvey highlights: there are a lot of nested hierarchies that link the “spheres” and levels with each other and that allow coordinated counterforce. Leaders and leadership experiences are essential to make those hierarchies work and allow factually existing and culturally articulated dual power to be durable and focused. This is no horizontalism, nor “consensual process”. Ghandi would have abhorred it, preferring to drink tea with the English. Nor is it about everyone being equal—on the contrary. Lazar and Gill also show that the insurgent “identities” that make El Alto what it is were not produced outside of the struggles around livelihoods, dispossession, and citizenship, in the Graeberian “open spaces of communist survivals”, so to speak. They were forged amid the “blood and fire” that Marx would expect with primitive accumulation (see also Kasmir and Carbonella 2014). What Harvey, in his turn, does not fully realize is that the ethnographies of El Alto show so well how methodologically spurious it is to approach theoretical notions of social relations and “mental conceptions” as if they are different empirical boxes that can be opened independently from each other. I exaggerate, of course, to make a point. Good ethnography, if it wants to discover anything, must
avoid the “violence of abstraction”, even when it desires to theorize beyond the local case. Lazar and Gill are indeed stark examples of what I would call historical and relational realism. Both feature mid-range theorizations of class and populist processes for which both Harvey and Graeber in these very different books seem to have equally little patience. Was this sacrifice necessary?

Coda: Fragility and durability in confrontational commoning (once more by way of an anecdote)

The Dutch secret service wrote in its annual report of 1980 that the country and the monarchy had never since 1918 been so deeply shaken by mass opposition. In the early months of 1980, tens of thousands of squatters and their sympathizers had been fighting tanks and tear gas in the cities of Amsterdam and Nijmegen. After these urban wars had predictably been lost militarily—but not ideologically—Van der Giessen and his crew had a poster distributed all over the country that called for a “Demonstration with Effects” against the ceremonial crowning of Queen Beatrix on Queen's Day, 30 April, in the center of Amsterdam. The new right-wing government, emerging from a decade of left-wing electoral victories, sought to reclaim the capital as a traditional national festive site for its own suburban and provincial constituencies. It sought once more a public confrontation with the “rotten” inner cities, now on symbolic ground of its own choosing. Squatters everywhere in the country were happy to reciprocate: 50,000 people, many masked and helmed and with ample “weapons of the weak” in hand, fought their way violently, as an urban peasant army, from the Waterlooplein through numerous crumbling police lines close to the New Church in the heart of the city. There, dignitaries from all over the world were attending the coronation and, solemnly huddled together, were gradually losing their nerves under a steadily growing hurricane of noises from the approaching civil war outside. A small team of radio amateurs hidden in De Keizer had disrupted the communications and logistics of the thousands of special security forces that had been brought into the city with much aplomb. After the winter victories of the security forces, authorities and commanders had totally underestimated the lust of the rebels for another fight—they thought they had been crushed. The rebels knew they would lose again against tanks, but they also knew that tanks on Queen's Day to save the coronation of the queen under the watchful eyes of the international television cameras were beyond the temerity of the Dutch right. Equally so would be a shoot-out. However, with the spectacular humiliation of the state on Queen's Day—until this day a hot potato for Dutch social memory because of the painful involvement of the House of Orange—the irreversible decline of what had been the most forcefully confrontational mass movement in Europe between Paris in 1968 and the Kievan Maidan of 2013–2014 had started.

As Harvey would anticipate and David Graeber knows, squatting had turned out to be an excellent facilitator for other struggles. Major squats were social and cultural centers that had formed the informal grid for a subversive urban commons that connected movements against nuclear energy, nuclear rearmament, student movements, feminists, radical artistic scenes, antiaircraft organizers, antiwar and anticolonial activists, pro-Nicaragua organizers, Solidarnosc supporters, and so forth. Squats were not essential for that, but they did facilitate the coming together of all these movements, sometimes directly on a personal level, sometimes just on style and substance. Squatting also radicalized the experience and practice of activists more than any of the other struggles because of the direct confrontations with public and private security structures. People would share in the physical defense of a squat and in the drawn-out preparations against violent attacks. They would learn the bodily lessons of forceful confrontation. And they would get to know each other within those practices. At general assemblies at occupied universities or antinuclear tent camps you would always recognize faces that
had shared the same spaces and experiences. It made for “strong ties” that would not at once give way under police assault, such as happened in New York the night that OWS was dismantled. People would stand together because they knew or imagined they knew each other, and they had a reasonable expectation of reciprocal support in high-risk situations. There was no Facebook, Twitter, or text messages to generate mobilizations, but there was a large and varied critical press (that is nowadays largely online), there was an “urban underground”, we had the universities, there were the illegal radio broadcasters to which everyone was listening, and there were the telephone chains. And indeed, there was bonding through the continuous physical meetings and events, political, social, and cultural. Ultimately, everyone felt that “their laws are not our laws”, as a popular slogan at the time had it: a nonambiguous way to underline what we would now somewhat esoterically call “cultural alterity”. Until today, the left in once-rebellious places such as Amsterdam and Nijmegen has continued to dominate municipal governments. The drawn-out experience of dual power lingered on as a strong local memory and as a claim for possible futures, despite an increasingly right-wing and neoliberal environment.

Two crucial absences served to unravel that strong and organized left-wing urban commons in the Netherlands—and this is where the horizontalists still have a lot to learn and where the urbanists will need to think again: labor and the (transnationalizing) state. Labor in the Netherlands had already been decidedly disciplined by the time of the squatters’ rebellions. The trade unions had lost several big factory occupations in the early 1970s. From 1975 onward the world crisis was hitting Dutch manufacturing exceptionally hard. The first massive hike in unemployment hit in 1976–1978. In 1980 unemployment was exploding further to hit a postwar record in 1985. This deeply affected the Labor Party, which was far from keen to support the urban struggles of the 1980s and felt it had to consolidate itself in the electoral middle—admittedly while continuing to shield the urban radicals legally. And while unemployment was peaking, the first budget cuts started to hit the welfare state, a downward pressure that would not relent for another generation at least. Finance was on strike, refusing to further fund the escalating state debt and demanding sky-high interest rates (stimulated to do so by the Volcker shock of 1981). Hegemony was now leaking away toward the anxious suburbs and the provinces and toward capital, the propertied middle classes, and the resurgent right. Domestic security forces would be beefed up, year after year, allowing a rapid and dirty crackdown on the rebel milieus, which immediately split into a small group of local red gangsters, a larger group of chosen exiles, and a large majority of toned-down but not yet fully passive dissenters (I was in between groups two and three, came back from “exile”, and started Focaal; Van der Giessen was in groups one and two, if I’m well-informed). Universities would be cut and disciplined; study programs and the right to study would be limited in duration; and students would be forced to focus on their results or lose their grants. Many squats were legalized and turned into rental housing of sorts. Part-time work combined with wage moderation emerged as the Dutch solution par excellence against unemployment and against the urban rebel milieu as well, which was gradually “put to work” in the late 1980s and 1990s. The 1980s in this country were a massive exercise in “responsibilization”, putting the Netherlands first in the development of the Third Way, combining well-designed and targeted welfare state supervision with strict overall neoliberal management, and putting it among the first in Europe in security and zero tolerance. By the early 1990s the “responsible” and increasingly ruthlessly competitive nation that had coauthored the neoliberal rules of the emerging European Union on behalf of its capitalist class (the “Maastricht Treaty” of 1991) was ready for a long wave of annoyed obsession with cultural difference, foreigners, immigrants, and assimilation. The moral majority was rejoicing at the booming real estate market into which the financial surpluses of its winning capitalism were recycled.
Segregation (in schools and neighborhoods) and gentrification were driven up to standards hardly known elsewhere on the continent. By 2008 it began to occur to some that private debts had been escalating, while the discrepancy between average housing costs and average incomes had become larger than anywhere else in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The nation was also forced, almost without warning, it seemed, to bail out its bankers and push up the public debt once more to 1980s levels. Predictably, there were no Dutch Graebers or Harveys in sight to explain the wider historical context.

One significant detail ought not to be overlooked at the end of this tale: in the 1980s Theo van der Giessen had sought refuge in the Caribbean, a not uncommon path for Dutch pirates. He has finally resurfaced in the Netherlands. And he has begun, bit by bit, to rescue the memory of the 1980s rebellions for a future, more confrontational Dutch left. He must be around 65 now. But he appears sufficiently fit to face down, almost singlehandedly and in a straightforward way, the roaring indignation of the reigning new right, which will have Geert Wilders for president, a right that has long been on a witch hunt to reveal the “historical crimes” of the 1980s radical left. I seem to see that Van der Giessen’s unassuming radical posture has given some in the silent and cowed circles of the Dutch left a bit of courage. I am happy to know he is around. As I imagine Graeber and Harvey would be if they knew about him.

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Notes

1. African examples in Debt serve exclusively to discuss “communism”, which thus remains, rather problematically, somehow an “original” prehistorical phase, even while its communist properties continue on as “baseline communism” within the later phases; the Americas only appear at the end of the book.

References


