



# From Maya enthusiast to Occupy activist: Allegra meets David Graeber REDUX

written by Allegra  
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David Graeber (1961) is the author of several books on theories of value, social theory and anarchism, including the award-winning [Debt: The First 5000 Years](#). For the wider public he is known for his involvement and visibility in the [Occupy Movement](#), a global commotion born out of protests against the growing disparity of wealth, social inequality and corporate influence on democratic decision making processes. With his ample 25 000 [Twitter followers](#) he is also likely the world's most visible anthropologist in the social media. Graeber was in Helsinki in mid-January 2014, for the [Anthropological Knots Symposium](#). Juho Reinikainen had a quick chat with him for Allegra after [a long day of anthro-talk](#).

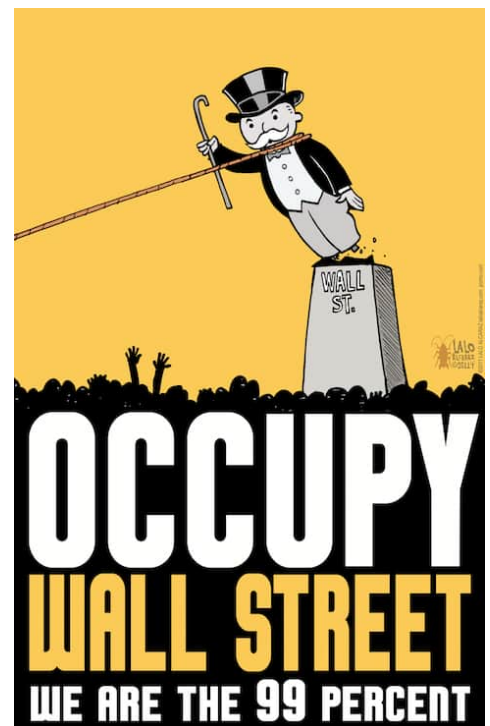
**Juho Reinikainen: How did you become an anthropologist?**



David Graeber: Good question. I usually attribute it to my upbringing. My parents were sort of working class intellectuals, the house was full of books. I started reading anthropology books from an early age, my parents were interested in that sort of thing. At the age of twelve I became fascinated by codes and translating hieroglyphics, and I actually got discovered by some archaeologists and ended up going to some fancy high school as a result. They were planning on sending me off to become a Maya exporate. Needless to say, I got over that phase. But when I went to college I finally thought I want to become an anthropologist after all, as it was something I had been interested in, one way or the other, my entire life.

**You are especially, at least to the wider public, known for your writings and opinions about anarchy and public movements. Can you tell me what is the current situation of the Occupy Movement?**

At the moment Occupy has become a multiplicity of different projects, at least in the United States. It is not gone by any means but it has been broken into a whole range of things.



For example, today there are people working on Occupy farms, there's the debt movement, anti-eviction projects – almost anything you could possibly imagine. In a way I think these are all responses to the realisation that we are facing really heavy police repression in public spaces, which revokes the (US Constitution's)



first amendment in terms of freedom of assembly. When this repression began to occur and when the sorts of people we thought were our allies – the moderate left, progressive types – failed to come to our aid and help us make an issue out of this experience, we (the Occupy Movement) realized we had to get organised on a longer term perspective.

So I think that what people are really working on through the Occupy Movement is to build a culture of direct democracy and direct action. People are training to acquire new skills that facilitate organizing meetings and street action.

*We're gradually building a foundation so that in the face of the next financial crisis, the next natural disaster, we will be in the position to be the first ones out on the the streets doing something.*

**You talked about a major Occupy related movement in the Anthropological Knots symposium about students occupying a University building...?**

Oh yeah, that is happening in London right now. Initially the student movement in London was organised actually before the Occupy movement; there were at least 14-15 student occupations occurring the same time as the earlier anti-cons[umerism] movement. In the first phase students protested against an educational reform which effectively semi-privatized the university system, a reform which momentarily vanished. Now the reform has really come up again, dramatically and quickly, out of nowhere.



I had sort of already given up on participating in the student movement, as I figured it was done, over. Yet suddenly there was a massive number of students fighting police in the streets. The government response has been much harsher and punitive than in the past – now the police just immediately started beating people up. This violence shows that the officials are in a state of panic because they really were not counting on this level of resistance. The nice thing is that the last time the educational reform was introduced it was a really defensive game for protestors as the officials introduce certain reforms before resistance was organized. This time, since we lost the battle during the first round, ironically, we're now in a better strategic position because it is now us who are setting the agenda, we are the ones in the offensive. People are taking to the streets in order to restore the free university system, to change the basic idea of what education is supposed to be about . I think it is very exciting.

**The Anthropological Knots Symposium was about anthropology's role in engaging in the society. What is your opinion, should anthropology**



### **engage more in the lives of the people it studies?**

I've always felt anthropology has something to offer. The way that the anthropological community resists when people want to contribute to change by protesting - the anthropological community almost has this reluctance for societal impact - I find a little difficult to understand. While I don't think anthropologists will all go joining social movements [...] few of you might actually lend your knowledge to people who want to use it to do some good in the world. Why not? [Scholarly life and activism] could actually be mutually enforcing.

### **So you think one can change the world with anthropology?**

Did I say that?

**No - do you?**

*I think anthropology has something to contribute to any project of social transformation.*

### **How do you see the future of the discipline?**

More internationalization of anthropology, which is going to lead into many different directions and different places. Anthropology could be constituted as a genuinely global planetary discipline, which could break free of the old colonial boundaries... and take advantage of that sort of diversity of perspectives to really enrich our self understanding.

### **One last question, which is a personal one: What are your hopes for the future?**

Well, I'm sort of looking forward to a broad social revolution, which will eliminate the state of capitalism and, you know, a truly free society. But that's a long-term project.



*Juho Reinikainen is an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology at the University of Helsinki. He also videoed the Knots Symposium for Allegra.*

Video of the interview is available [here](#).

Other interviews of Graeber that are worth a read:

- On the topic of [bullshit jobs](#) in Salon
- About [democracy](#) in America for AlterNet
- On the [Occupy Movement](#) for Gawker
- [“Finance is just another word for other people’s debts”](#) in Radical History Review
- And, as a fun bonus, “What’s the Point if We Can’t Have Fun?” in The Baffler!

## **Brief bibliography of David Graeber:**

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