

The Return of Abstract Universalism: A Critique of David Graeber's Concept of Society and Communism

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Abstract: In this essay I critically examine David Graeber's concept of "everyday communism." Graeber claims that that all societies are ultimately based and founded upon what he calls the "communism of the senses." This "two-level" version of social reality, as I intend to show in what follows from a Marxian standpoint, should be rejected, as it operates with a descriptive concept of society that posits as the center or "essence" of society its universal and ahistorical "human" base, on top of which hierarchical and economic relations are posited as "superstructures." Graeber favors a theory that posits an ahistorical base underneath the historical. As a consequence, society disappears underneath an empty and abstract concept of the ethical. This image of society, I will argue with Marx and Engels, overlooks the categorical form of social relations, which cannot be reduced to an empty and abstract concept of sociality as "human" ethical relations. This is especially visible in the case of capitalist socialization.

Introduction

One of the major contribution to recent "post-Marxist" debates undoubtedly comes from David Graeber, whose book *Debt: The First 5000 Years* received much public attention beyond the narrow boundaries of academic discourse, especially in Europe. The book sold more than 30,000 copies during the first week of its publication in Germany and

was discussed in virtually all national German newspapers as well as many international news outlets. Graeber, who has published before on anarchist anthropology and is well known for his political activism, presents a fascinating history in his book of the relationship between debt, money, morality, and violence.¹ Within this context Graeber develops an anthropological concept of communism that has not, as far as I can see, received much attention within recent philosophical discussions of a proper twenty-first-century idea of communism that came out of discussions between Douzinas/Žižek, Negri, Dean, Bosteels, and Badiou.²

Given this lack of reception, in this essay, therefore, I do not deal with Graeber's main thesis about the priority of debt and credit over money and exchange; rather, I critically examine some of his claims about what we might call the concept of "everyday communism." Graeber claims that that all social relations are ultimately based and founded upon what he calls the "communism of the senses." As Graeber puts it,

communism may be the foundation of all human relations—that communism that, in our own daily life, manifests itself above all in what we call 'love'—but there is always some sort of system of exchange, and usually, a system of hierarchy built on top of it.³

This "two-level" version of social reality, as I intend to show in what follows, should be rejected, as it operates with a descriptive concept of society that posits as the center or "essence" of society its universal and ahistorical "human" base ("love"), on top of which hierarchical and economic relations are posited as "superstructures." Graeber favors a theory that posits an ahistorical base underneath the historical. In Graeber's vision, "[t]he shared

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1. I would like to underline that I deeply admire Graeber's wide ranging intellectual contributions to an engaged form of social and political thinking, such as the concept of radical democracy, the concept of anarchism, and the concept of direct action. Moreover, I have taught some of these ideas in seminars. In this essay I critically focus on *one* single aspect of his theorizing, which, given recent discussions about the concept of communism, deserves more attention. Needless to say, my critique presented here should not be extended to other aspects of his work. As such, this essay should also not be read as an evaluation of his book on debt. Graeber's position, however, displays current tendencies in post-Marxist thought very well by its attempt to founding "society" on something other than itself, such as the political, the ethical, or the linguistic.
 2. For this, see Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010); Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism* (London: Verso, 2011); Jodie Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012); and Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010).
 3. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melvillehouse 2011), 385; henceforth cited as *Debt*.

conviviality could be seen as a kind of communistic base on top of which everything else is constructed.”⁴ In addition, it implies a utopian concept of humanist communism, based on what Engels highly ironically called in *History of the Communist Brotherhood* “love giddiness”⁵ (*Liebesduselei*), insofar as he (in the name of Marx) criticizes pre-Marxian (German) socialists for building their social vision on some form of abstractly defined human or Christian love that is already *given* in society. This type of humanism, we might say, is just another version of positivism. Similarly, Graeber claims in the above quote that communism and love is the “foundation of *all* human relations.”⁶ I will reject this position from a Marxian standpoint, which I systematically take over in this essay as a contemporary position to be defended within contemporary debates.

In what follows I will first outline Graeber’s position, after which I will argue against his abstract universalism and ethicism. With Marx, I argue that once one understands that “being human” is a social-material and not an ethical concept, one is forced to give up the idea that communism is something that underlies the whole historical process, which, according to Graeber, even includes capitalism. As such, Graeber’s tacit assumption that the essence of the social is not social, but ethical (i.e., abstract sociality), falls back behind the insight reached in Marx’s sixth Feuerbach thesis that being social should not be understood as an abstraction posited as *external* to the existing individuals; instead, it should be understood as the really existing “ensemble of the social relations.”⁷ I should underline that Graeber’s contri-

4. Ibid., 99.

5. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 43 volumes (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956–2013); henceforth cited as *MEW*, followed by the volume number; here *MEW* 21, 213. Engel’s text appeared in 1885 as an introduction to a new edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. An implicit reference to “Liebesduselei” that Engels has in mind can be found in the *Communist Manifesto* itself, namely, in its section about the popularity of the humanist and “truly German” socialism (for this, see *MEW* 4, 487). All quotations are checked for their accuracy, as some older translations of Marx’s work are often inadequate. The reader can easily check my references to the German *Werke* in the Marxist internet archive via its search function; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/index.htm>.

6. *Debt*, 385; my emphasis.

7. *MEW* 3, 6. The sixth Feuerbach Thesis can be read as a statement about society, which in the later Marx is more clearly developed as a theory of categorical form and social objecthood [*Gegenständlichkeit*], because positing the human essence as something external to humans in their actuality means that society itself is conceived as something abstract, i.e., through communication, language, ethics, recognition, abstract morality, etc. The usual English translation of “*Verhältnis*” as “social relation” is misleading, since the English term indicates a relation between two people, but the German term refers to the *whole* of how people are related to each other. Accordingly, to

butions to the concepts of debt and political anthropology are not only intellectually stimulating, but also an important contribution to contemporary discussions of money and related political issues. Accordingly, my critique deals with *selected* conceptual problems of his ethical vision of communism, but it does *not* constitute a rejection of his ideas as a whole.

The Problem

In this section I shall briefly introduce the main point before I will go into specifics in the next sections. In Graeber's picture of social reality, the human base remains independent from social-productive relations, as the latter are not mediated with the former; rather, social-productive relations are conceived to lay "on top" of the human base. This, in some sense, odd reversal of the old base-superstructure division, favored only by worldview Marxists, leads, ultimately, to a theory that operates with an ahistorical foundation of the historical process; for the supposedly authentic being of humans is posited over against its historical corruptions in this theoretical picture. Put differently, Graeber favors a theory that posits an ahistorical base underneath the historical. Communism, as Graeber conceives it, is an anthropological and *ethical* concept, the consequence of which is that Graeber misses an important Marxian insight, namely, that speaking of "human" and "humanity" in general is only possible if we conceive it from the ground up as a mediated concept that implies a strong concept of *social form*. Social relations "as such," consequently, are something "fixed" and "static" in Graeber's descriptive account of humans, instead of being conceivable in social-productive *forms*. This two-level image of society, I will argue with Marx, overlooks especially the categorical form of capitalist socialization, which cannot be reduced to an empty and abstract universalism, and, given Graeber's background in history and anthropology, is an even more surprising ahistorical essentialism in regard to the concept of communism.

Graeber is a universalist *in regard* to communism as something that is, as Graeber himself says, the *condition* of *all* societies. In short, he identifies communism with sociality as such, whereas the consequence of my Marxian position is that communism could only be conceived as a *determinate form of society*. Whereas the term "society" indicates a totality of relations, i.e., presupposes unity, a uniting principle, and categories of social objecthood [*Gegenständlichkeit*], the term "sociality" simply refers to humans related to each other in an *undetermined* [*unbestimmt*] way. Accordingly, this

claim that humans in their actuality are an "ensemble of relations" refers to *the way in which* concrete social relations between individuals are constituted, i.e., it is the *form* of sociality. This is indicated in the plural of "*Verhältnis*," namely, "*Verhältnisse*," which should not be translated as "relations," but more properly, as "conditions," "situations," or "circumstances."

dialectical concept of society can only be coherently developed if its unity is not posited as something external to the entirety of its relations. Consequently, Graeber's position fails to analyze *specific* social categories, such as the categories of capitalist society as their *determinate* [*bestimmt*] whole.⁸ I am in line here with philosophers such as Adorno who speaks of this definite form as "a move towards the essential."⁹ Moreover, as we might say with Althusser, positing a base-superstructure in any form remains a "metaphor," i.e., projects an *image* of society, and does not reach theory or thought. As Althusser has it, "[t]he greatest disadvantage of this representation of the structure of every society by the spatial metaphor of an edifice, is obviously the fact that it is metaphorical: i.e., it remains *descriptive*."¹⁰ Accordingly, Graeber's division between "communism," "hierarchy," and "exchange" should be rejected on dialectical grounds, as they remain *theoretically* and philosophically unsatisfactory.¹¹

8. Put differently again, since several reviewers of this essay had mixed feelings about my thesis, by "sociality" I mean some kind of "relationship" between humans; for example, sharing food or being "moral" or being "related to the other;" with "society" I refer to the *unity* presupposed for any kind of sociality, not only because it is the condition of its possibility, but also since it determines the form under which any "relationship" is possible, as otherwise we would return to some abstractly defined "pure humanity," which, again, according to my thesis, would be like "sociality without form." For example, sharing food cannot be conceived *socially* without its how, when, where, with whom and with what. As Marx has it in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, "hunger" is different if satisfied with fingers or forks. Consequently, I think that any speculation about human relationships "as such" might be of interest on some general level, but they are *socially* meaningless. Society *contains* its social relations, and that's why they cannot be found *external* to its unity.
9. For this, see lecture four in Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen, Band 15 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2003). Though I agree overall with Adorno's position, I have argued elsewhere that Adorno misses the central status of money and value for a satisfactory theory of capitalist society; for this, see Christian Lotz, "Capitalist Schematization: Political Economy, Exchange, and Objecthood in Adorno," in *Zeitschrift für Kritische Theorie* 36/37 (2013): 110–23.
10. Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, translator not named (London: Verso, 2008), 10.
11. I am underlining this point, as one reviewer of this paper remarked that I did not see that Graeber introduces, in addition to communism, two additional principles of social organization. Though this observation is correct, this does not change the fact that Graeber conceives of communism as something that underlies *all* social activity and, consequently, it *cannot* be defined as a social form. Against this I pose here a dialectical picture: if we reject to speak of "human nature" as such, then we *must* conceive of communism as a *specific* social-historical form, i.e., we need to reject humanist accounts of communism. Moreover, we need to see the *metaphorical*, i.e., positivist nature of Graeber's

Instead of the *reproduction* of life as a *determinate* form and expression of productive life, Graeber's position implies that there is a principle located *before* the reproduction of life. To repeat this simple point, it is clear that all politics, all ethics, and everything else human would disappear if we would stop being productive and would stop laboring; reproduction of life is primary, and it cannot be grasped without the production of needs, its cooperative element, and its (presupposed) relation to the earth. Even a psychic self-relation can only occur *within* this field. This constituting "productivity," however, *is not* universal; rather, it is *determinate* [*bestimmt*] by its categorical form. As Marx puts it in *The German Ideology*:

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.¹²

What Marx has in mind, as Patrick Murray¹³ and others, have argued, is not a simple economic determinism; rather, the claim is that we need to understand society as the determining *form* of the whole as something from which "sociality," i.e. intersubjective relationships, can only be abstracted. To repeat the point, "society" is not identical with sociality or "intersubjectivity." Sociality *as such*, from a Marxist position, remains an *empty abstraction*. In contradistinction to Graeber and other post-Marxists such as Negri¹⁴, then, I claim that sociality cannot be derived as an *immediate* element of life, insofar as we need to think about it as a *form* of productive-social relations, the consequence of which is that it is mediated through its form on *every* level of its being (the position of which could also be developed

theorizing, and, finally, as I argue, Graeber's universalism leads to grotesque consequences, as in his "ethics" virtually all actions based on "sharing" become "communist," which, I believe, is grounded in Graeber's overall idea that social relations are *ethical relations*. This leads to absurd consequences, as even a fascist or Stalinist society would be based on communist sociality in Graeber's world.

12. MEW 3, 21.

13. For example, see Patrick Murray, "Money as Displaced Social Form: Why Value cannot be Independent of Price," in *Marx's Theory of Money: Modern Appraisals*, ed. Fred Moseley (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 50–64.

14. I have criticized Negri's position from a Marxian point of view in Christian Lotz, "Marx contra Negri: Value, Abstract Labor, and Money," in *Interventions. Contemporary Italian Political Philosophy*, ed. Antonio Calcagno (New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

with Lukacs's later ontology of social being).¹⁵ The organization of these relations into an existing whole, a form, is necessary for the reproduction of this whole. *Society does exist*, but it does not exist in the universal. As Marx puts it in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, production as such cannot exist, and, we should add, society as such cannot exist either. This *finitude* gets lost in post-Marxist thought, such as in Laclau, Badiou, Ranciere, Honneth, and Graeber. For Graeber, I submit, society is founded upon sociality as something *external* to society, but from a dialectical Marxian point of view, which I systematically take over in this essay, sociality is always internal to society. This position has nothing to do whatsoever with the claim that "the" economy has priority over other spheres of society.

Everyday Communism

Graeber's concept of everyday communism is posited against the picture of neoclassical economic theory, which argues with a primitive notion of self-interested and strategic agents. Against this picture of human nature, Graeber puts forward what could be called a phenomenology of everyday human sociality. This sociality, according to Graeber, is made up by daily gestures, activities, and behaviors within which we treat each other without the influence of utilitarian, egoist, self-interested, or strategic goals. As Graeber intends to show, this level of sociality underlies everything else and makes society possible. As he puts it,

[i]f we really want to understand . . . human life, it seems to me that we must start . . . with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all.¹⁶

This "hidden" substance of every society is what Graeber takes to be communism, and, he claims, it cannot be destroyed. We find it in all forms of society and throughout the whole course of history. More specifically, by "communism" Graeber wants to understand "human relationships that operate on the principles of 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.'"¹⁷ In all societies, Graeber argues, the principle of communism is already in place. Thus, rather than being the goal of history, a norm to be reached, or a utopian version of society, communism is for Graeber an *axiom* of social relationships:

15. For this, see Georg Lukacs, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, 1. Halbband, Lukacs, Werke, Band 13 (München: Luchterhand, 1984); and Georg Lukacs, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, 2. Halbband, Lukacs, Werke, Band 14 (München: Luchterhand, 1986).

16. *Debt*, 89.

17. *Ibid.*, 94.

[i]t is something that exists right now—that exists, to some degree, in any human society, although there has never been one in which *everything* has been organized in that way, and it would be difficult to imagine how there could be. All of us act like communists a good deal of the time.¹⁸

Communism, hence, for Graeber is related to how individuals *act* and to how they guide their actions, and not to how a social totality and its mode of production are formed (I will come back to this point). Consequently, Graeber puts forward a conception of society that is ultimately based on ethics and not, as others would argue, on the economy or on the political. This point immediately helps us to see that Graeber lacks a concept of social totality beyond individual agents. In addition, it explains the two-level view that Graeber favors:

The shared conviviality could be seen as a kind of communistic base on top of which everything else is constructed. It also helps to emphasize that sharing is not simply about morality, but also about pleasure. Solitary pleasures will always exist, but for most human beings, the most pleasurable activities almost always involve sharing something: music, food, liquor, drugs, gossip, drama, beds. There is a certain communism of the senses at the root of most things we consider fun.¹⁹

Other aspects of Graeber's ethics of sharing and generosity that is supposedly underlying all societies and which Graeber mentions are "small courtesies like asking for a light, or even for a cigarette"²⁰, acts of helping others, language ("[c]onversation is a domain particularly disposed to communism"²¹), as well as eating: "The obligation to share food, and whatever else is considered a basic necessity, tends to become the basis of everyday morality in a society whose members see themselves as equals."²²

After having outlined Graeber's conception of communism, in the following, I will address two aspects of his conception that, I think, should lead us to reject Graeber's position from a social-material standpoint, based on the main claim that it is not ethics that founds society, but, instead, that society, i.e., the unity of society, constitutes itself through the principle of *its* reproduction.

Graeber's Abstract Universalism

In the introduction to *Grundrisse* Marx addresses the problem of universalism as a problem of abstraction. He attacks political economists who try to define production as something with universal properties won through a

18. Ibid., 95.

19. Ibid., 99

20. Ibid., 97.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 98.

reflection that separates what originally belongs together. Marx argues, instead, that production always needs to be analyzed in relation to its historical level and in its dialectical totality, which includes subjectivity, circulation and consumption. Furthermore, an abstract and general concept of production remains empty, as it cannot be applied to any given historical period. Hence it is ahistorical: "If there is no production in general, then there is also no general production. Production is always a *particular* branch of production—e.g., agriculture, cattle-raising manufactures, etc.—or it is a *totality*."²³ By "totality" Marx refers to what is dialectically contained in production. For example, a specific mode of life, such as the capitalist mode of life, implies specific modes of consumption, circulation, subjects, environmental relations, mental conceptions, theories, etc. We can conclude from the foregoing the reasons for why the "suspicion towards the very idea of a totality of social relations"²⁴ that we find in post-Marxist thought goes into the wrong direction, as it is *precisely* the concept of totality that leads to a *detotalization* of history, to an anti-teleological concept of history, and to the possibility of rupture based on the negativity of the capitalist totality, which leads to a fundamental *finitude* of this specific social organization.²⁵ The main failure of Graeber, and other recent post-Marxist theory, is its attempt to found society on something other than itself.²⁶ "Dialectical totality" means that every element of the social reality is *mediated* with the others, which Marx calls an "organic system:"

While in the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system.²⁷

23. MEW 42, 21.

24. Alberto Toscano, "Marxism Expatriated: Alain Badiou's Turn," in *A Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. Jacques Bidet and Stahis Kouvelakis (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 529–49, here 533.

25. The most extreme version of interpreting this finitude comes from Moishe Postone, who even reads the concept of wealth as a historically specific concept. For this, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

26. The other failure, I submit, is to acknowledge the substantial role of what could be called the "monetization" of all social relations in their totality; for this, see Christian Lotz, "The Transcendental Force of Money. Social Synthesis in Marx," in *Rethinking Marxism* 26.1 (2014): 130–40; and Christian Lotz, *Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), which, again, would lead us back to labor and productive relations.

27. MEW 42, 203.

As Marx argues in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, the reproduction of social reality through labor is only possible if production, consumption, and circulation hang internally together.

Social reality, in other words, is not something in which the “spheres” of production, consumption, and circulation are separated from each other, as if they would form three instead of only one social reality. In this case we would need to assume that we switch realities, so to speak, when we leave our jobs (production), buy food (exchange), and go home to eat (consumption). If, however, we assume that all three constitute “society” as its frame, we already presuppose that they refer to *one* social reality and not many, i.e., they also do not refer to “levels” or “spheres,” as Graeber seems to assume in his descriptive account of society. As Marx puts it in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: “the productive relations of every society form a whole.”²⁸ In empirical accounts of capitalist reality, such as Graeber’s, its *moments* are turned into *elements* that are arbitrarily related to one another, i.e., *descriptively* ordered. As this complex totality, however, can only be grasped through its internal categorical relations and, accordingly, through *theory*, it transcends simple empiricist accounts of capitalism and needs to be grasped as a schema that regulates really occurring actions and agents.

In this vein, with Marx, we should argue, against Graeber, that his position is based on abstractions that, as such, never exist, since in order to exist they need to exist in a *determinate* form. A universal base of society can *as such* never exist, given that there are no existing societies “as such.” For example, what “sharing” is depends upon its social form and how it is mediated within the totality of productive-social relations. Sharing food in capitalism differs from sharing food in the Middle Ages, for instance, insofar as the social determinations of food differ. Graeber’s universalist view becomes especially prominent when he claims that even capitalism is based upon communism. “But all social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually existing communism.”²⁹ This claim is truly astonishing, as it becomes even clearer that Graeber returns to some sort of pre-Marxian conceptions of communism and socialism.³⁰ “[M]ost capitalist firms,” Graeber claims, “internally, operate communistically.”³¹ As an example for this claim about the intrinsic communism of capitalist firms Graeber discusses Apple. Apple, according to Graeber, was, in its beginnings, based on “little democratic circles of twenty to forty people with their laptops in each other’s garages.”³² The

28. *MEW* 4, 130.

29. *Debt*, 95.

30. For this, see *ibid.*, 404.

31. *Ibid.*, 96.

32. *Ibid.*

fact, however, (1) that the laptops that these early Apple communists had in their garages on their laps, *if we assume that they already had laptops (!)*, were produced in cheap labor countries by a newly emerged proletarian class for less than 90 cents an hour, (2) that these communists depended upon class divisions and the division between manual and intellectual labor that made their communism possible, or (3) that it implies a specific system of transportation and legal protections, not to mention a distribution of labor, does not seem to be important to Graeber. We can see at this point very clearly why this abstract, anti-dialectical position, especially if we take into account that Graeber refers to capitalist firms at even beyond their early stages, leads to absurdities. If communism were the truly universal element in all societies, then it could be applied to everything, including Manchester capitalism, Fascism, and Stalinism. Sharing will not help us understand *society* as an integrated whole. If everything is communist, then nothing is communist. Moreover, whenever we assume an ahistorical (and in some sense asocial) base of social relations we are no longer able to see the *conditions* under which such an abstraction from the social reality is possible.

Accordingly, Graeber's position is ultimately ideological, as it is simply the expression of a universalism that overlooks the perspective from which it reflects upon its basic concepts. As Marx argued in the introduction to *Grundrisse*, economists such as Smith are ideological for two reasons: first, they do not realize that their position (for example, the claim that capitalism is "natural") is an empty abstraction that does not understand the dialectics of production and reproduction. Second, they do not realize that their own abstract position is made possible by a specific mode of production that *is itself* abstract. Marx argues, and this can be extended to Graeber, that the theoretical position that Smith reached by constructing a general economics was only possible because capitalist social relations were already in place, i.e., individuals and labor become defined by labor power itself and no longer through particular labor. Accordingly, we need to see that there is no general economics and Marx's project in *Capital* consists precisely in rejecting the possibility of (a) general economics. As Poulantzas has it,

the very fact that the space, field and respective concepts . . . of the economy (relations of production) present themselves in different ways according to the mode of production, leads to a conclusion that runs counter to all formalist theoreticisms. . . . [T]here can be no general theory of economy . . . having a theoretical object that remains unchanged through the various modes of production.³³

In a similar fashion, Graeber gives us the best—ideological—arguments for making a case for why capitalist companies are based on communist

33. Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2000), 19.

generosity, thereby hiding that capitalist companies are not constituted by a bunch of computer nerds smoking pot and sharing their knowledge in their garages, but by a complex system of production and social relations that depend upon a *specific* mode of production and its reproduction, in which all actions are mediated through the results of other actions.

To pose a “universally” existing base implies that this base is *external* to the reproduction of the relations of production. Sociality, in other words, is here conceived as *external to society*. In contrast, in relation to Apple we need to see that the labor power of more than 300,000 Foxconn workers, the exploitation of natural resources, such as copper and gold in Africa, the recycling of electronic garbage in Bangladesh, the advertisement campaigns and branding, the production of consumers who “need” Apple products, all belong to this system that *is contained* in “Apple.” To claim that Apple is “internally” operating communistically (Graeber claims, to repeat the point, that most capitalist firms operate internally on communist grounds), hence, does not make any sense and covers up the *actual* relations of production and the entire social system that makes those possible. The main argument against such a universalist position is, then, that the activities that Graeber has in mind are moments of the system of the social reproduction of social relations. Similar to how Marx argued against an abstract concept of production, we can argue against an abstract conception of a communist base of society; for Graeber does not see that concepts are social concepts because they belong to totalities of relations, and not because they describe a universal sociality.

Sharing cigarettes, one of Graeber’s preferred examples for his ethical vision of society, is only possible if someone produced the cigarettes, distributed cigarettes in the society, and reproduced individuals that “need” cigarettes. Whatever these individuals “believe” about principles of their actions is not unimportant, but it remains secondary. The form under which this network of relations is possible is the real condition of possibility for individuals to relate to each other in some “communist” form in Graeber’s sense. It is important to note that Graeber, accordingly, understands, in contradistinction to Marx, the sentence “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” as a *principle of action*,³⁴ though I would claim that it is meant as a way of organizing the relations of production. This distinction is crucial, as it leads to Graeber’s methodological individualism, which in turn explains his ethical point of view and his abstract claims about a “communist base” of social reality. He assumes, as a consequence of his basic conceptual distinctions, that we have “free-standing” individuals who encounter each other as agents and who base their actions on (communist) norms. Graeber, consequently, does not think of a mode as a way in which

34. For this, see *Debt*, 94.

a society *could* reproduce itself, namely, in a communist form; rather, his position implies the claim that the communist *norms* make reproduction possible. This is indicated when he claims the “*obligation* to share food, and whatever else is considered a basic necessity, tends to become the basis of everyday morality in a society whose members see themselves as equals.”³⁵ To speak of “obligations” presupposes moral principles that determine actions which, in turn, make society possible. Consequently, something like a social totality is, in Graeber’s conception, an “illusion,” a sort of superstructure that we could also take away and a “normative core” would remain. It is clear, however, that Graeber has a moral vision of society which operates on universalist assumptions about the constitution of society as a whole.

Graeber’s Moralism

Graeber’s rhetoric about moral principles, and his conception of communism as an ethics of generosity becomes conceptually even more confused if we consider how Graeber deals with what he calls “morality.” Let us look a second time at the quote that I already referred to above:

If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life, it seems to me that we must start instead with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all.³⁶

It is highly questionable whether it makes any sense to speak here of “moral” grounds of economic life. For example, two killers might well pass along an assault weapon to each other when they are about to enter a high school building in order to produce a massacre. Is this “communist gesture” moral? One could argue that in this case the sharing of guns and the “generosity” on which this is based is immoral, as it is motivated by another principle of action (which is not economic), namely, to have fun engaging in a killing spree. Or, imagine the following scene: you provide your friend a cigarette though you know that she has lung cancer and that every cigarette she “bums” will bring her one step closer to death. Most of us would argue that giving her a cigarette is immoral. Sharing and generosity, then, is clearly not a good thing in all cases. Accordingly, what Graeber has in mind with his thesis that there are moral grounds of economic life is that most everyday activities are neither necessarily self-interested nor based on strategic considerations. Neither of these, however, have much to do with “morality,” inasmuch as even altruistic actions and non-strategic behavior are in many cases immoral. To

35. Ibid., 98; my emphasis.

36. Ibid., 89.

call, then, everyday communism a “moral principle”³⁷ does not make any sense, as Graeber only *describes* certain behaviors, but does not make a case for why these things *ought to be done*. To make this case, however, he would need philosophical arguments to support his anthropological descriptions, which he fails to deliver.

Finally, Graeber’s descriptive account of human nature is, to say the least, naïve. For example, Graeber writes: “This is presumably also why in the immediate wake of great disasters—a flood, a blackout, or an economic collapse—people tend to behave the same way, reverting back to a rough-and-ready communism.”³⁸ It is highly doubtful whether this account even makes empirical sense, given that we know of plenty of cases where people, instead of sharing, become very hostile towards each other. The recent events surrounding hurricane Katrina in the south of the US showed a deep-seated racism in the US society rather than a romantic turn to a supposedly humanist and communist generosity (which, of course, also occurred, but cannot be understood without the contradictory framework of capitalist society). It is here where we find Graeber’s “love giddiness” most prominently expressed. As a consequence, these ambivalences should prevent us from coming up with the generalities on which Graeber develops his view of society.

Social Totality, Anthropology, Capitalism

After having dealt with Graeber’s concept of communism, which was, again, the sole focus of this essay and should not be confused with an exhaustive discussion of his multi-faceted work, I shall conclude this paper with a few reflections that move beyond this focus. Graeber would most likely reject the position presupposed in this essay, as I operate with the tacit assumption that we can meaningfully, i.e., in a philosophical sense, speak of social forms or of social totalities, such as “capitalism.” For in his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Graeber rejects this position. In this connection, he writes that his position

does not necessarily mean that one has to agree with the premise that once capitalism came into existence, it instantly became a totalizing system and that from that moment, everything else that happened can only be understood in relation to it.³⁹

Rather than suggesting that capitalism becomes a totalizing system *in reality*, we should note, first of all, that the problem of social totality is above all a *conceptual* and theoretical problem, given that it is a problem about

37. Ibid., 94.

38. Ibid., 96.

39. David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 49; henceforth cited as *Fragments*.

how we can reconstruct social reality in thought. Making this distinction is necessary if we do not want to fall back onto a positivistic approach to sociality that posits “society” as a given. As Adorno ironically puts it in his 1964 lecture course on philosophy and theory of society, theory needs to go beyond that which we find in the Baedeker (a famous German travel guide). Put differently, doing social (critical) theory means that we go beyond what is simply *given*.⁴⁰ Social theory, therefore, cannot be reduced to positive phenomena, the analysis of policies, empirical facts, definitions, or abstract arguments. The consequence of this position is that “society” itself cannot simply be posited as a given; rather, society is—*because* it is a totality—something to be reconstructed and understood theoretically.

As Marx puts it in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, social dialectical philosophy proceeds by appropriating the concrete via reproducing that which is concrete (the whole) through a process of thought. Only at the beginning does this process operate with abstract categories. Social totality, accordingly, is non-identical and dynamical, insofar as “society” does not exist like a thing with properties. In addition, in the case of capitalism we are permitted to construct such a totality in thought because, with Marx, we claim that capitalism as a social totality is a form of social organization that is itself, i.e., in reality, based on a universal principle, namely, value as the *really* abstract principle under which *all* social relations are constituted. Value is a purely social concept. Indeed, it is only because of this abstraction that capitalism can unfold a dynamic that is at this point global.⁴¹ Graeber, however, tends to reduce social objectivities to anthropological or psychological projections, motives, etc., which, I claim, should be rejected on theoretical grounds.⁴² Taking social agents as bearers of objective instances, however, does not mean that they are only bearers; rather, in order to *understand* them as social individuals, where the emphasis is on their sociality, they need to be understood as being part of a specific totality, since otherwise we posit a universal psychological or ethical mode of “being social” beneath *society*. Graeber is certainly correct in claiming that the identification of this form with “mode of production” fails, but he tends to overlook that philos-

40. For this, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft*, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen, Band 4 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2008), 39.

41. I lay out all details of this position in Lotz, *Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction*.

42. The problem of social totalities and their conceptual reconstruction is, of course, closely linked to how one thinks about politics. In this regard Graeber’s position is coherent, insofar as one might argue that giving up the idea of changing the social totality through either revolutionary or technological means must necessarily lead to an anarchist position that conceives of politics as requiring ethical (direct) actions.

ophers such as Adorno, Lukacs, Postone, Harvey, and Marx himself, never claimed that capitalism can be reduced to production of things alone. Again, this pushes us back to hard-fought battles in Marxist philosophy, but, I submit, we will not exorcise the problem by ignoring it.

Moreover, Graeber *reduces* the social totality to a “mix” of components, such as race, class, and gender, and, hence, he follows in post-Marxist and postmodern footsteps, with only one difference, namely, he assumes that *all* of these categories ultimately can be traced back to a *universal* principle, namely, kinship-relations.⁴³ The consequence of this position, similar to his attempt to interpret Apple computer geeks as communists, is a reduction of social objectivities to a “clan system,” which, according to Graeber, can equally be applied to societies, such as Nambikwara or Arapesh, and contemporary US society and its relations.⁴⁴ He writes:

Let us imagine, then, that the West, however defined, was nothing special, and further, that there has been no one fundamental break in human history. No one can deny there have been massive quantitative changes: the amount of energy consumed, the speed at which humans can travel, the number of books produced and read, all these numbers have been rising exponentially. But let us imagine for the sake of argument that these quantitative changes do not, in themselves, necessarily imply a change in quality: we are not living in a fundamentally different sort of society than has ever existed before, we are not living in a fundamentally different sort of time, the existence of factories or microchips do not mean political or social possibilities have changed in their basic nature.⁴⁵

Though I appreciate the thought experiment, and though I see the problem of exceptionalism, this view presupposes at least one aspect that contradicts Graeber’s thought experiment, namely, the fact that the universalizing thought experiment is itself only possible because the really existing social relations are as such based on abstraction and universality, which, in turn, means that Graeber already *presupposes* capitalism as a totality that, because of capital, can potentially exist universally all over the planet. Graeber, however, argues, that we should let go of the concept of capitalism as a totality and, instead, only keep the principle of wage-labor in order to make

43. For this, see *Fragments*, 51.

44. For this, see *Fragments*, 52.

45. *Ibid.*, 50. For an analysis of the problems that arise out of that position, see David Graeber, “Turning Modes of Production Inside Out, Or Why Capitalism is a Transformation of Slavery,” in *Critical Anthropology* 26.1 (2006): 61–85, here 66; henceforth cited as *Turning*: “The idea that capitalism is as old as civilization is of course a position long popular among capitalists; what now makes it palatable on the Left is largely that it can be seen as an attack on Eurocentrism; . . . defined so broadly, it becomes very hard to imagine eliminating capitalism at all.”

sense of it, which might indeed be a good starting point. This principle, however, becomes then immediately subjected to the gaze of the anthropologist and, magically, turns into a universal principle of human social organization. As Graeber writes, we should

argue that modern capitalism is really just a newer version of slavery. Instead of people selling us or renting us out we rent out ourselves. But it's basically the same sort of arrangement.⁴⁶

So, capitalism is, put simply, nothing new; rather, it is the *extension* of something found throughout human history. We can see here how Graeber's abstract universalism functions in other writings than *Debt*, as he tends to reduce the *entire history* to some abstractly functioning principle or structure.

Graeber tries to justify this reduction with an interesting move. In his otherwise brilliant essay "Turning Modes of Production Inside Out," he argues that the separation of home and workplace, "that is to say that the making of people and the manufacture of things should properly operate by an entirely different logic in places that have nothing to do with each other"⁴⁷, has striking similarities with slavery. This move, however, is objectionable on theoretical grounds, insofar as it does not justify the implicit assumption that "capitalism" can be reduced to *one* of its properties or categories, such as the separation of home and work place. Similarly, the attempt to *reduce* it to wage labor⁴⁸ fails, as this presupposes value, which presupposes money, which presupposes capital, which presupposes credit, etc. This *system* of categories only exists in its unity, and as a unity it forms a whole. Every attempt to identify the whole with *one* of its properties, as Hegel already argues in *Who thinks abstractly?*, leads to abstractions. However, the system of categories is not simply based on the production of material things that excludes the ideal world, as Graeber seems to think⁴⁹; rather, it is based on the principle of *reproduction*, which also includes the production of people through the distribution of social functions that subjects can occupy.⁵⁰ In

46. *Fragments*, 71.

47. *Turning*, 62.

48. For this, see *ibid.*, 68.

49. For this, see *ibid.*, 71.

50. I am underlining this, as Graeber seems to think that Marxism reduces everything to the production of things (*Turning*, 69–71; for this, also see David Graeber, "Value as the importance of action," in *The Commoner* 10 [2005], <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=22> [last accessed December 24, 2013], 16), the thesis of which has been rejected in recent Marxist literature. In addition, the so called labor theory of value that still haunts economic Marxism has been rejected by the entire German *Neue Marx Lektüre* (for example, Heinrich, Backhaus, Elbe, Reichelt), but also readings of Marx by Italian scholars (for example, Fineschi, Tomba, Basso). Value is in these readings, which I support, no longer is seen as some kind of "substance" that can be defined, measured

capitalism the overall reproduction of capitalist social relations can only be realized if they are steered, formed, and made possible by processing money (capital) as a universal determination of social reality.

Conclusion

In sum, Graeber's strategy to turn specific concepts into universal concepts of human history and to operate with an abstract concept of sociality might be justified on anthropological or empirical grounds, but, as I argue here, it tends to identify a specific aspect and to apply it to human civilization as a whole. This move should be subjected to a *theoretical* critique, and, in the end, Graeber makes the same mistake as neoclassical economists, namely, he naturalizes capitalism by arguing that it is simply a different version of what we have seen throughout human civilization.⁵¹ Though Graeber claims that he does not fall into this trap,⁵² it remains unclear how he can avoid it. — • —

and represented *before* money, exchange and consumption. Instead, value is from the very beginning a *social* concept. Portions of the Marxist reception in the US remains tied to debates that are at least half a century old. For the new understanding of Marx, see exemplarily Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1995; English translation in preparation by Haymarket Books). The German and Italian overall position is also (roughly) supported by David Harvey, though not in philosophically defined terms. For this, see David Harvey, "History versus Theory: A Commentary on Marx's Method in *Capital*," unpublished paper (2014) (accessed in London, June 2014). According to Harvey, the inclusion of volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital* leads necessarily to the insight that value is virtually nothing without its realization in distribution and consumption.

51. I should *emphasize* that this argument does not lead to a rejection of anthropology as a whole, as Graeber argues in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* that anthropology is actually the only discipline that could make possible a universal discourse about social phenomena, given that it is the only discipline that (hypothetically) could know about all human possibilities for organizing societies.
52. For this, see *Fragments*, 97.