

## David Graeber—There Was Never A West, Or democracy emerges from the spaces in between

Is “democracy” an inherently Western concept? Does it refer a form of governance (a mode of communal self-organization), or a form of government (one particular way of organizing a state apparatus)? Does democracy necessarily imply majority rule? Is representative democracy really democracy at all? Is the word permanently tainted by its origins in Athens, a militaristic, slave-owning society founded on the systematic repression of women? Or does what we now call “democracy” have any real historical connection to Athenian democracy in the first place? Is it possible for those trying to develop decentralized forms of consensus-based direct democracy to reclaim the word?<sup>1</sup>

---

Based on a project, initiated by Philippe Pirotte<sup>2</sup> and the David Graeber Institute (including the support of Nika Dubrovsky), a group of the Städelsschule developed a site-specific work around Graeber’s Pirate Library which focuses on underground methods of infiltration—the idea was “to disseminate readings from the Library in a way that is activated through the act of live speech and an engagement of listening to reading in a public way”<sup>3</sup>. The performed interventions included sound, singing and interference performances during the opening of the Venice Biennale 2024.

Following up to the passage above from Graeber’s Essay *There Never Was a West Or, Democracy Emerges From the Spaces In Between*, we will have a closer look at his theories, thoughts and demands on democracy, anarchy and freedom. In the first instance, this short essay aims to briefly present the afore mentioned thoughts, and thus extract the most important points in his multi-layered, complex work. The concept of Eurocentrism will be critically examined - not as a destructive dismantling, but as an act of liberation for new perspectives. Conventional notions of ‘the West’ will be challenged by exploring alternative perspectives, beginning with re-questioning the idea of democracy as an exclusive product of Western civilization, examining the importance of contact zones, and showing the anarchist influence on democratic thought.

Almost everyone who writes on the subject assumes that democracy is a ‘western’ concept whose history begins in ancient Athens. But when we consider that egalitarian communities existed before 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens and throughout human history (for examples see 2. Democracy Is Not Exclusively Western) the question arises: where did it come from? A thesis that Graeber examines in his book *Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia*, develops from the sensitive tracing of the actual origins of freedom, anarchy and democracy - i.e. the concepts that, according to Graeber, were not discovered in the West, but hijacked by it. The so-called ‘rise of the West’, also better described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot as the emergence of the “North Atlantic system”, is based less on the values of the ‘Enlightenment’ than on the unimaginable exploitation and destruction of entire civilizations, mass enslavement and the death of numerous minorities through genocide.<sup>4</sup>

It [the system] also produced its own forms of cosmopolitanism, with endless fusions of African, Native American, and European traditions. Much of the history of the seaborne, North Atlantic proletariat is only beginning to be reconstructed (Gilroy 1993; Sakolsky & Koehnline 1993; Rediker 1981, 1990; Linebaugh and Rediker 2001; etc.), as a history of mutinies,

---

<sup>1</sup> Graeber, “There Never Was a West Or, Democracy Emerges From the Spaces In Between”, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Pirotte is Adjunct Senior Curator at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and the Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA). He is also a member of the Documenta Commission (2019-2022), which selected Ruangrupa as Artistic Director of Documenta 15 (2022). Pirotte was Rector of the Städelsschule and Director of Kunsthalle Portikus from 2014 to 2020. He was a member of the curatorial team of the Jakarta Biennale in 2017 and artistic director of the 2016 edition of La Biennale de Montréal.

<sup>3</sup> Title of the Performance: The Sound of Defiance. At: Paludo S. Antonio, Biennale di Venezia, N45 25°49' E12

<sup>4</sup> Vgl. Graeber, ebd.

pirates, rebellions, defections, experimental communities, and every sort of Antinomian and populist idea, largely squelched in conventional accounts, much of it permanently lost, but which seems to have played a key role in many of the radical ideas that came to be referred to as “democracy”.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Democracy Is Not Exclusively Western

Graeber points out that many nonwestern Indigenous societies, had practices resembling democratic governance, long before or independently of European traditions. He disputes the claim that democracy originated solely in the West (i.e., ancient Greece) and that it belongs to western heritage. Instead, he highlights how democratic practices have existed in various forms around the world. Some of the key examples Graeber mentions include South Asian traditions as the republican traditions in ancient India, systems of consensus from Indigenous peoples of North America, the Acephalous Societies in Southeast Asia and also Polynesian Societies. The following selection is subjective and extended by the studies of James C. Scott.

- Indigenous Peoples of North America

The Iroquois Confederacy (referred to by the endonym *Haudenosaunee*) is given as one of the most notable examples of indigenous governance with democratic elements.<sup>6</sup> The Confederacy was a union of several tribes (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and later the Tuscarora), which had a system of councils, where decisions were made through *consensus*. This system influenced American democratic thinkers, especially during the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. The Haudenosaunee used a non-hierarchical, participatory approach to decision-making, with strong values of equality, collective responsibility, and public debate. The values of freedom were something that colonists appropriated from indigenous or non-western societies, and which led many colonists to defect to communities that were not based on coercion and authority.<sup>7</sup>

- African Societies

Further, the *Somali pastoralists* are stated, whose practices persisted without any direct influence from European governance structures and were embedded in Somali pastoralist culture.<sup>8</sup> *The Igbo of Nigeria* also had a highly decentralized political structure, where decisions were made collectively in village assemblies. In gender-separate but equal councils, both men and women participated in decision-making processes. This form of governance emphasized autonomy, participation, and consensus, making it a non-hierarchical and egalitarian system.<sup>9</sup>

- Acephalous Societies in Southeast Asia

The Zomia (who live in a mountainous region in the size of Europe between seven south-east Asian countries) have fled the projects of organized state societies that surround them—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.<sup>10</sup> They deliberately avoided state systems and lived in decentralized, stateless societies, emphasizing autonomy and resisting external authority. Among the strategies employed by the people of Zomia to remain stateless are

---

<sup>5</sup> Graeber, ebd, p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Iroquois is a colonialist foreign designation.

<sup>7</sup> Vgl. Graeber, There Never Was a West, Part IV: The Influence Debate. For a comparison of the U.S. Constitution, further information: Johansen 1982; Grinde & Johansen 1990.

<sup>8</sup> I. M. Lewis, A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics Among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa.

<sup>9</sup> Further Literature: Ifi Amadiume's "Male Daughters, Female Husbands". It examines gender and power in Igbo society but also touches on their inclusive, decentralized forms of governance.

<sup>10</sup> Vgl. The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

“physical dispersion in rugged terrain; agricultural practices that enhance mobility; pliable ethnic identities; devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders; and maintenance of a largely oral culture”<sup>11</sup>, that allows them to reinvent their histories and genealogies as they move between and around states.<sup>12</sup>

These examples support Graeber’s argument that democracy is not the exclusive product of Western civilization. Instead, democratic-like practices have emerged organically in diverse cultures and situations around the world, often in egalitarian or stateless societies that valued *consensus*, *collective decision-making*, and *social equality*.

## 2. Anarchist Influence on democratic thoughts

Though not indigenous or pre-modern, Graeber is keen to link these decentralized democratic practices to more modern movements influenced by anarchism, that also emphasize *voluntary cooperation*, *mutual aid*, and *direct democratic decision-making* as alternatives to state-driven models of governance. In a certain sense, the anarchist idea contrasts with the logic of ‘universal’ knowledge production, as it focuses on the positions and subjects that bring the discourses of freedom, democracy and anarchy to light in the first place. Thus, a categorical classification is explicitly avoided in order to counteract the myth of universality: classification is abandoned in favor of multiperspectivity. This yearning for freedom comes from the marginalized, the subaltern, whose voices are not heard. They must unite and form collectives in order to survive and therefore have had more opportunities to develop democratic practices. For his thesis Graeber gives several real-life examples as living embodiments of anarchist ideals, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Paris Commune, pirate practices, or modern movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Zapatistas in Mexico, or Rojava in northern Syria. These approaches and democratic ideas, he argues, often emerge in the ‘spaces in between’—the liminal zones where different cultures, people, and systems interact. These contact zones are where people negotiate power and governance, often leading to forms of egalitarian rule.

In Chapter IV: *Recuperation of Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Graeber mentions the anarchist essence of the pirate less as a criminal, but more as a social innovator. Pirates, or ‘the social bandits’, were generally seamen forced into service against their will, who had mutinied against tyrannical captains and “declared war on the whole world”. As Markus Rediker reconstructs, the crews of ships, whose captains were granted greater general powers, insisted on their right to remove their captains at any time, for example when showing cowardice, cruelty or other misconducts. The final authority rested with a general assembly, that often decided even on very minor matters – most of the times by majority rule and by a show of hands. It should be remarked that the composition of the crews was often extremely heterogeneous (e.g. the crew of Black Sam Bellamy’s in 1717 included British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native Americans, African Americans, and many Africans who had been freed from a slave ships). “It was the perfect intercultural space for experimentation. In fact, nowhere in the Atlantic world at the time was there a more fertile ground for the development of new democratic institutions.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Graeber acknowledges that we cannot possibly know whether these democratic practices, that developed on Atlantic pirate ships in the early 18th century, actually had any direct

---

<sup>11</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> While Graeber references concepts related to Zomia, the direct discussion of Zomia comes from James C. Scott. In: *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Graeber, “There Never Was a West Or, Democracy Emerges From the Spaces In Between”, p. 21.

influence on the democratic system later.<sup>14</sup> But what he does is, he uses the look at earlier history to show that the absence of state power also means an absence of a systematic coercive mechanism to enforce decisions; “this usually amounts to either some kind of *consensus*-building process - as we saw from the examples of indigenous decision-making processes above - or sometimes, in the case of fundamentally military formations like the Greek hoplites or pirate ships, a system of *majority voting*.”<sup>15</sup>

Democratic innovation, and the emergence of what might be called democratic values, tends to spring from what I’ve called zones of cultural improvisation, usually also outside of the control of states, in which diverse sorts of people with different traditions and experiences are obliged to figure out some way to deal with one another. Whether in Madagascar or medieval Iceland, on pirate ships, in trading communities around the Indian Ocean, Native American confederations on the edge of European expansion, all of the examples here are frontier communities.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The Sound of Defiance—Materiality and Performance

If we abstract these frontier communities and extend their definition to a heterogeneous body/mass that functions fluidly and without state influence or leadership, the act of performance as well as the production process, to return briefly to *The Sound of Defiance*, could be seen as an embodied form of disruption and transformation. If you look at the definition of performance art, it becomes more understandable. The term performative was coined by the philosopher and linguist John L. Austin while teaching at Harvard University. He derived the term from the English verb “to perform”, “to accomplish”. One ‘performs’ actions.<sup>17</sup>

The performers of *The Sound of Defiance* produced neither artifact nor semiotic intelligibility. Instead of an artwork that has an existence- independent of the artists and the recipients- they created an event in which all those present are involved. The work thus opposes not only the representational character of art, but also the commodity character of artworks, which makes them economically exploitable. The claim to a marketable artifact was thus abandoned in favor of a deeper engagement with body, materiality and the appropriation of (public) space. In many respects, performance art transcends boundaries and is often accompanied by the breaking of taboos; as the audience encounters a situation that overrides previously valid norms, rules and certainties within the established art framework, signifier and signified, subject and object relationships change. One could therefore postulate that the ability of the performative is to destabilize dichotomous conceptualizations, even to cause them to collapse.<sup>18</sup> The performative stubbornly resists the claim of a hermeneutic or semiotic aesthetic, that aims to understand the work of art. It has *the right to opacity*.<sup>19</sup>

### 4. The Sound of Defiance, Or the Future of Democracy

What we are experiencing today is not a crisis of democracy but rather a crisis of the state. In recent years, there has been a massive revival of interest in democratic practices and procedures within global social movements, but this has proceeded

---

<sup>14</sup> Graeber, “There Never Was a West Or, Democracy Emerges From the Spaces In Between”, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Graeber, “There Never Was a West Or, Democracy Emerges From the Spaces In Between”, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Graeber, ebd.

<sup>17</sup> Vgl. Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Ästhetik des Performativen*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004 p.34.

<sup>18</sup> Vgl. Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Ästhetik des Performativen*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2004 p.36.

<sup>19</sup> Reference to Édouard Glissant.

almost entirely outside of statist frameworks. The future of democracy lies precisely in this area.<sup>20</sup>

On a smaller scale, the attempt to create these special areas was given by the absolute freedom in the project development of *The Sound of Defiance*. Philippe Pirotte initiated this approach. If the universities are considered as the tools of the state, one could assume that the students have moved in these so-called 'zones of cultural improvisation' through the freedom they were given. Smaller groups were able to come together and, in their own democratic processes of voluntary coordination (though a closer examination of this would be necessary), created a work that not only produced an awareness of anarchic structures, but also implemented them in the process itself.

But to return to the questions raised at the outset: Does "democracy" refer to a form of governance (a mode of communal self-organization), or a form of government (one particular way of organizing a state apparatus)? Does democracy necessarily imply majority rule? Is the word permanently tainted by its origins in Athens, a militaristic, slave-owning society founded on the systematic repression of women? Instead of *democracy* being a linear development - from ancient Greece to modern Europe - Graeber suggests that it frequently arises in areas of cultural hybridity and exchange. He critiques the linear narrative of its historical progress, where the singular West is seen as the primary agent of social and political advancement; this view overlooks the influence of marginalized or colonized peoples and the complex processes that shape governance. Perhaps we might need a new terminology, or rather a new way of looking at the term, since "democracy" does not refer exclusively to parliamentary forms, but includes all practices of egalitarian decision-making: such as the drawing of lots for offices, council systems with imperative mandates or the complex consensus procedures that Graeber has studied and shown in stateless societies. Going further, he asks whether it is possible for those who seek to develop decentralized forms of consensus-based direct democracy to reclaim the word democracy? Decentralized forms of governance and resistance can arise in the most unlikely of places: in the context of the sound of defiance, we can resume that this will be one of the leading questions for the future, which we are trying to shape in the present.

---

<sup>20</sup> Graeber, Intro p.5.