

Published online: <https://www.isrf.org/2020/11/19/in-memorial-david-graeber-1961-2020/>

To our shock, David Graeber passed away on 2 September. In this piece Charles Stewart reflects on and celebrates David's recent work.

Charles Stewart

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Main image:

David Graeber speaks at Maagdenhuis occupation, University of Amsterdam, 2015. Original

image by Guido van Nispen

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David Graeber died in Venice on the second of September at the age of 59. His loss is felt keenly by the ISRF, where David was [a Mid-Career Fellow in 2013-14](#). His ISRF project, 'The state as a convergence of heterogeneous elements: a deep historical approach,' investigated the historical coherence of three criteria of the state: sovereignty, the 'heroic principle' (leadership, election), and bureaucracy. He ventured on the insight that these three features faded in and out as 'historical hybrids' in perpetual tension with one another. This formulation picked up themes present in his earlier works such as *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004) where he recognized the instability of political forms, which ebb and flow from authoritarian to consensual, from possessive individualist to communal. The fruits of his fellowship may be found in publications such as *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (2015) where he lampoons the high tide of bureaucratization, or *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (2019), which tackles the proliferation of jobs, some

of which serve only to aggrandize bosses in an agonistic 'managerial feudalism.'

David was first and foremost an anthropologist. Marshall Sahlins at the University of Chicago, whose essay about Australian Aborigines who work only a few hours a week and spend the rest of the time preparing and performing rituals counterpointed the bullshit jobs thesis, supervised his doctoral thesis on the legacy of slavery in Madagascar. The two went on to publish a book together, *On Kings* (2017). The discipline did not, however, always treat David kindly. Yale University terminated his appointment in 2005, apparently on account of his role in protesting graduate student employment conditions. After that, no American universities hired him and he came to the UK where he taught at Goldsmiths (2007-2013) and then at the LSE.

David acquired a global reputation for his role in the Occupy Movement in New York in 2011, his involvement in numerous other protests and movements, and his visits to the autonomous Kurdish Rojava area in northern Syria. His writing, and his exemplary personal commitment, have set the tone for 21st-century activism. This may be seen in his coinage of the slogan 'we are the 99%' and in his advocacy of a prefigurative politics, where protest movements conduct themselves according to the values and practices they want to see embraced in the future. That he maintained vital involvement in academic writing, popular writing and activism long after he became famous testifies to his essential modesty and to his commitment to actually bring about a fairer world.

At the time of his death, David had just completed a new major work in collaboration with the archaeologist David Wengrow. In scope, it parallels his monumental *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011). Entitled *The Dawn of Everything*, this book aims to overturn the faulty historical picture (or myth) of early human societies. That narrative, given enormous influence by the writings

of Rousseau and Marx, holds that hunter-gatherers lived in egalitarian societies, before being swept away by sedentarism and claims to private property, which gave rise to exploitation, inequality and so many other social ills. The thesis of this forthcoming book, which harkens back to David's ISRF fellowship project, holds that there were no purely egalitarian societies in the mists of the past. Drawing on work such as Marcel Mauss's *The Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo* (1904-5), they contend that political forms varied seasonally, or periodically. They may, for example, have been egalitarian in winter and hierarchical in summer. The argument is that humankind always has, and always has had, alternations in its mode of organization. Hierarchical stratification might be one such reversible variation; humankind is not hurtling unidirectionally toward more and more exploitation. Like many of David's other works, this book offers a way to think differently about our conditions and alert us to the prospect of changing them. We await the publication of this book in 2021.



David Graeber. Original

image by Thomas Good ([CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)).

In many of the pictures that circulated after his death, and in person, David radiated a playfulness, a sort of puckish mischievousness; always ready to laugh at the ironies and hypocrisies of the situation, whether that situation be today or centuries or even millennia ago. His eyes at times quizzical, at other times signalling surprise, or fascination, express a kind of joy. That is how he will remain, close at hand, refreshing, as his writings continue to appear and as his body of work is read over and again in the future.

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Charles Stewart is on the ISRF's [Academic Advisory Board](#).

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