

The anarchist: How David Graeber became the left's most influential thinker

The anthropologist and best-selling author will be remembered for a life spent fighting for a freer, more joyous and egalitarian world.



Every once in a while, a thinker revolutionises the way we see the world and helps us reimagine the things we once took for granted. David Graeber, the anthropologist and bestselling author, whose unexpected death on 2 September at the age of 59 has shocked the international left, was such a rare cultural phenomenon.

A prominent public intellectual and influential activist, Graeber's work had a profound impact on the thinking behind a new wave of political action – from Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and the ongoing struggle for Kurdish autonomy, to Momentum's campaign for a more socialist Labour Party.

Graeber, who was born to working-class Jewish parents in New York City in 1961, was steeped in political radicalism from a young age. His mother, a garment worker, played the lead role in the 1930s musical *Pins & Needles*, the only ever Broadway hit to have been produced by a labour union. His father fought in the International Brigades against Franco's fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War between 1937 and 1939. Graeber's lifelong commitment to what he called "[small-a anarchism](#)" – an approach to libertarian socialism, "whose ideological practice", Graeber wrote, "consists of teaching by example" – was forged within this febrile family environment.

The maturation of his political views was also influenced by his ground-breaking work as an anthropologist. Graeber enrolled for a PhD at the

University of Chicago in the late 1980s, where he wrote his thesis on magic and the legacy of slavery in Madagascar. He established a reputation as a prodigious scholar and won a prestigious appointment at Yale University, where he published extensively on the anthropology of value and exchange.

But academic success never prevented Graeber from being politically active. Around the turn of the century, he became a prominent organiser in the global justice movement, which protested against the neoliberal policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. While he resolved to keep his scholarship at Yale separate from his activism in New York, his anti-capitalist views alienated him from the faculty. In 2005, the university controversially refused to renew his contract – Graeber and his supporters [claimed](#) that the reasons for this were political rather than academic. Despite his impressive research record, Graeber struggled to find a job in the US, and in 2008 he moved to the UK for a teaching post at Goldsmiths, University of London. He then accepted a professorship at the London School of Economics in 2013.

As an anthropologist, Graeber understood “how different cultures define the world in radically different ways”. Having conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the central highlands of Madagascar, he [saw](#) how the island’s “hybrid rebel culture, created by a population of escaped slaves”, had generated alternative views and definitions of political concepts such as obligation and authority.

The insights he gained through this research pushed Graeber to examine the elemental phenomena of modern Anglo-American society: How did late-capitalist culture come to define money and debt in the way that it does? Why do we value some types of work more than others? And what is the real meaning of democracy? Does democracy even exist?

These were the subversive questions at the core of his writing that established Graeber as one of the most notable thinkers of the crisis-ridden 2010s. His commercial breakthrough came in 2011, with the publication of the acclaimed [Debt: The First 5,000 Years](#), a magisterial study that undermined the longstanding assumptions of mainstream economics about the origins of money and debt.

Graeber demonstrated how money, far from being rooted in a peaceful process of market exchange, really emerged from the unequal power relation between debtor and creditor, marked by a long and complex history of violence and morality. Its publication was meticulously timed: *Debt* came out just before the Occupy movement in September 2011, which endeavoured to highlight the central role of Wall Street in perpetuating a debt-based economy that favoured

the financial elite.

Graeber himself played an active part in the Occupy movement, coordinating meetings at Zuccotti Park and helping to coin the movement's famous battle cry: "We are the 99 percent."

In subsequent works, written in his witty and playful style, Graeber brought his anthropological training to bear on topics such as democracy ("one of the earliest really democratic institutions were pirate ships"), bureaucracy ("a cop is a bureaucrat with a gun"), and technology ("where, in short, are the flying cars?"). One of his most influential essays, "[On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs](#)", became a successful book in 2018 that interrogated the emergence of ever more meaningless forms of work. "Huge swathes of people in Europe and North America," he argued, "spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul".

One reason for Graeber's popularity on the left lay in his capacity to communicate complex ideas to a wide audience, combining engaging prose with disarming humour (a rare quality among his contemporaries). He revitalised old concepts such as class and revolution, but in a way that gave readers the feeling they had encountered something new and exhilarating, even if Graeber was openly building on ideas developed over the course of a long-standing tradition of popular struggle.

Characteristically generous, Graeber spent his life fighting for a freer, more joyous and egalitarian world. He leaves behind an impressive body of work, including an unpublished manuscript co-authored with the archaeologist David Wengrow, an ambitious deep history tentatively titled *The Dawn of Everything*. The full scope of Graeber's political and intellectual legacy is yet to be grasped. But if there is one thing that endures in his writings, it is the force of hope in times of universal crisis and despair. "The ultimate, hidden truth of the world," Graeber once wrote, "is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."

Goldsmiths