

Institution:	Goldsmiths, University of London
Unit of Assessment:	24: Anthropology & Development Studies
Title of case study:	Value, debt, direct action and participatory democracy
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)	

David Graeber's research has four main interrelated strands. The first concerns the relationship between economic anthropology and anthropological theory; the second concerns a theory of value developed through comparative analysis in anthropology; the third concerns the concept of debt revealed in the historical and ethnographic record; and the fourth concerns the relationship between social theory, and direct action and participatory democracy. These strands have had immense impact, via two works in particular, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2009) and *Debt: the First 5,000 Years* (2011). *Debt*, in particular, has been acclaimed as one of the most insightful contributions to economic thought to have emerged from the post-2008 reflections on the banking and financial crisis. It is an agenda-setting contribution to discussions across the board and around the world, a singular achievement for an anthropological work. Such a wide public profile for an anthropological text merits comparison with the impacts of Mead, Lewis and Levi-Strauss.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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David Graeber was Lecturer and then Reader in Social Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London from Fall 2007 to Summer 2013, when he left to take a Chair at the LSE. Some of the research detailed here was undertaken whilst employed at Yale prior to 2007 but the most important was written and published whilst he was at Goldsmiths.

The research that forms the basis for Graeber's subsequent work lay in the ethnographic fieldwork in Madagascar that provided the material for his PhD dissertation. There, working among Malagasy peoples whose notions of politics evade encapsulation as 'institutions', Graeber confronted a well-known phenomenon in anthropological investigation, the 'society against the state.' This concept was framed by Clastres, and like Clastres, Graeber resisted the conventional mode of analysis according to which the absence of explicit political structures was viewed as an obstacle to be overcome. Instead, such an absence was conceived as a virtuous departure from 'top-down' political control, not the noble savagery of Rousseau, but a rejection of the potential dystopia of political hierarchy. That initial research provided the grounding for later work that culminated in two broad positions that lie at the heart of the published work under consideration here. These are the relevance of anthropology (implying cross-cultural comparison and method based in fieldwork) to a theory of politics and to a theory of the economy. They are recognizable to audiences with specialist academic interests, but also to those with extra-academic interests in public culture. The development of Graeber's research is simultaneously conventional (the typical development of a PhD project into an expansive mid-career synthesis) and also extraordinary, in terms of impact. It has produced a body of work whose academic authority translates into vastly wider readerships than most academics could hope to achieve. *Debt*^[1] galvanized an academic audience looking for persuasive accounts of the underlying causes of the financial crisis, but was equally visible in the hands of travellers on the London transportation system and in beach bags.

Direct Action^[2] takes conventional externally oriented fieldwork and applies it to an internal (US) social movement. By employing field-based direct engagement with research subjects, *Direct Action* foregoes the posture of outside participant-observer and adopts the point of view of a partisan observer-participant. Similarly, *Debt* departs from convention by eschewing the direct gathering of primary material in favour of extensive mining of secondary historical and

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ethnographic sources. Both works exhibit a generational anthropological ambition to cohere around core disciplinary concerns, while simultaneously stretching the remit of anthropological theory to address matters of general public concern. Such ambitions have been present in orthodox anthropology since its academic formation – Boas, notably, hardly shied away from public policy implications – but *Debt*, in particular, is able to translate anthropological authority into a vernacular discourse that preserves a direct link with some of the more abstruse aspects of anthropological theory.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)
Work undertaken and published whilst at Goldsmiths:

1. Graeber, D. *Debt, The First 5,000 Years*, New York:Melville House, 2011. Book: ISBN-1933633867 [hard copy available on request]
2. Graeber, D. *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009. Book: ISBN 1904859798 [hard copy available on request]

Earlier work:

- Graeber, D. *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001 Book: ISBN-0312240449
- Graeber, D. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004 Book: ISBN-0972819649
- Graeber, D. *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007 Book: ISBN 978-0-253-34910-1.
- Graeber, D. *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire*. Oakland, CA: AK Press., 2007 Book: ISBN1904859666

The high quality of Graeber's research in the eyes of his professional peers was further shown by his winning the 2012 [Bateson Award](#) of the American Society for Cultural Anthropology for *Debt*.^[1] Reviews of the book by other academics and a range of influential commentators have been outstanding. A collection of comments about the quality of the work can be found [here](#). Some of the most telling are as follows:

- a. "His writings on anthropological theory are outstanding. I consider him the best anthropological theorist of his generation from anywhere in the world." Maurice Bloch, Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and European Professor at the College de France"
- b. "Graeber is a star in the left-academic world...the most influential anthropologist in the world." —*The Chronicle of Higher Education*
- c. "Debt [is] meticulously and deliciously detailed." Ben Ehrenreich, *Los Angeles Times*
- d. "One of the year's most influential books. Graeber situates the emergence of credit within the rise of class society, the destruction of societies based on 'webs of mutual commitment' and the constantly implied threat of physical violence that lies behind all social relations based on money." Paul Mason, *The Guardian*
- e. "If you want to get a fresh perspective on the issue, take a look at a fascinating new book called *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* by David Graeber ... not just thought-provoking, but also exceedingly timely." Gillian Tett, *The Financial Times*
- f. "The book is more readable and entertaining than I can indicate... It is a meditation on debt, tribute, gifts, religion and the false history of money. Graeber is a scholarly researcher, an activist and a public intellectual. His field is the whole history of social and economic transactions." Peter Carey, *The Observer*

At the point of submission of this documentation, *Debt* had been cited 226 times and *Direct Action* 123 times according to Google Scholar.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of Graeber's work has grown over time, beginning with *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*. But with the publication of *Debt*, produced whilst at Goldsmiths, his impact has assumed dimensions with few, if any, precedents in anthropology. It is perhaps unique in the breadth of its international recognition and for the range of current debate over which it is influential. Sources to corroborate the impact are given in parenthesis and detailed in section 5.

Graeber's arguments in *Debt*, and particularly the galvanizing claim that the current economic crises might be usefully informed by reflecting on the long historical record of debt cancellation, received much initial attention because it was considered so radical. As the disarray of standard economic explanation and policy became more widely acknowledged, debt cancellation came to be more seriously considered and discussed in important public forums. In Germany, *Debt* was number 2 in the best-seller lists for a week and drew the attention of both *FAZ* and *Der Spiegel*. It was also intensely discussed in Italy, where the book was a number 10 best-seller. These levels of sales and coverage were achieved in Germany and Italy by the English-language edition. First published in English in 2011, *Debt* is scheduled to appear in translation in: Chinese (both simplified and traditional characters), Italian, Turkish, Greek, Korean, German, Japanese, Dutch, Spanish, Slovak, Swedish, Czech, and French.

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (15 April 2013) Keith Hart noted that: 'An argument of *Debt*'s scope hasn't been made by a professional anthropologist for the best part of a century, certainly not one with as much contemporary relevance' (3). That relevance was indicated in part by the breadth of mainstream publications that published articles on or interviews with Graeber: *Business Week*, *Harpers*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *New Yorker*, among others. Coverage was not confined to outlets that might be expected to sympathise with the views Graeber espoused, but also included publications such as *The Economist* and *US News and World Report* (in which *Debt* was recommended as one of the 'Best Summer Money Books for Adults' (4).

While *Debt* was the focal point for much of this print coverage, Graeber's work on the relationship between activism and anthropology was also prominent, especially at the height of the *Occupy* movement's activities, for example in a *New York Times Book Review* piece by Thomas Meaney ('Graeber's most important contribution to the movement may owe less to his activism as an anarchist than to his background as an anthropologist') (5). Graeber has written for newspapers and other print media including *The Guardian* (6) *In These Times* and the *Commoner*, as a commentator whose combined anthropological and activist background lends authority to his pronouncements on money, anarchism, *Occupy* and the radical imagination (7).

Outside the mainstream, *Debt* has been the focus of a great deal of political and technical discussion in well-established Left publications (e.g. *New Left Review*) and new publications and blogs reflecting a post-New Left, web-enabled bridging of academic and political commentary (e.g. *Jacobin*, *Crooked Timber* (8)). Among academic economists, especially those open to heterodoxy, and economics pundits, *Debt* has opened up discussion drawing heavily on political economic, classical and neo-classical debates, and has reintroduced economic anthropology as a source of

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concepts of contemporary relevance. In the domain of new and online media, the impact of *Debt* has continued to expand long beyond the typical life of a 'best-seller' published in 2011. There are 13,800 *YouTube* entries for interviews with Graeber (these include many network broadcasts as well as interviews for more specialist audiences) the most popular of which has been viewed almost 40,000 times (9) and on REDDIT there are 520 entries ranging across Anthropology, the History of Ideas and Anarchism. *Debt* won the inaugural Bread and Roses Award for radical literature in the UK in 2011.

The impact of *Debt* has a breadth and depth unique among modern anthropological publications, in part because it addresses matters of great public interest which are typically mediated by an academic specialism, economics, which is broadly seen to be 'relevant' in a way denied to many other academic fields. The impact of Graeber's work on direct action and anarchism is enhanced by its association with his commentary on the current economic crisis. It reflects interest in a discourse based in a 'social movement' politics that has arisen in the core Euro-American economies, most visibly revealed in Occupy. Said to be the coiner of the expression 'we are the 99%' (10), Graeber is an activist and author whose work has become a key reference point for a largely generational politics of the franchised-become-disenfranchised (11).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

3. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013, "[A Radical Anthropologist Finds Himself in Academic 'Exile'](#)"
4. '[Best Summer Money Books for Adults](#)' *US News and World Report*
5. *New York Times* Book Review "[Anarchist Anthropology](#)" by Thomas Meaney
6. Articles by David Graeber in *The Guardian*: "[Note worthy: what is the meaning of money?](#)"; "[Occupy and anarchism's gift of democracy](#)"; and "[Occupy Wall Street rediscovers the radical imagination](#)"
7. Article on *Occupy* in The Chronicle of Higher Education "[Intellectual Roots of Wall St. Protest Lie in Academe](#)"
8. [Jacobin](#) and [Crooked Timber](#) blog posts on *Debt*.
9. [YouTube](#) interviews with David Graeber
10. *Rolling Stone* Politics article "[Inside Occupy Wall Street](#)" which credits Graeber for giving the *Occupy* movement its theme: "We are the 99 percent."
11. *Bloomberg Business Week* magazine article, October 2011: "[David Graeber, the Anti-Leader of Occupy Wall Street](#)" by Drake Bennett