

LSE Research Online

David Graeber

Occupy and anarchism's gift of democracy

Article (Published version) (Refereed)

Original citation:

Graeber, David (2011) Occupy and anarchism's gift of democracy. The Guardian (15 Nov 2011)

© 2011 Guardian News and Media Limited

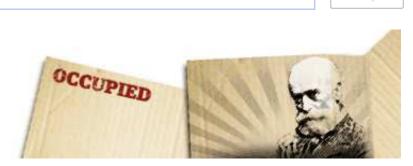
This version available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53317/

Available in LSE Research Online: October 2013

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk) of the LSE Research Online website.

theguardian





Occupy and anarchism's gift of democracy

The US imagines itself a great democracy, yet most Americans despise its politics. Which is why direct democracy inspires them



David Graeber theguardian.com, Tuesday 15 November 2011 17.00 GMT



Occupy Wall Street protesters regroup after eviction by riot police from Liberty Plaza on 15 November 2011. Photograph: OWS PR team

As the history of past movements all make clear, nothing terrifies those running America more than the danger of true democracy breaking out. As we see in Chicago, Portland, Oakland, and <u>right now in New York City</u>, the immediate response to even a modest spark of democratically organised civil disobedience is a panicked combination of concessions and brutality. Our rulers, anyway, seem to labor under a lingering fear that if any significant number of Americans do find out what anarchism really is, they may well decide that rulers of any sort are unnecessary.

Almost every time I'm interviewed by a mainstream journalist about OWS, I get some variation of the same lecture:

"How are you going to get anywhere if you refuse to create a leadership structure or make a practical list of demands? And what's with all this anarchist nonsense – the consensus, the sparkly fingers ... ? You're never going to be able to reach regular, mainstream Americans with this sort of thing!"

It is hard to imagine worse advice. After all, since 2007, just about every previous attempt to kick off a nationwide movement against Wall Street took exactly the course such people would have recommended – and failed miserably. It is only when a small group of anarchists in <u>New York</u> decided to adopt the opposite approach – refusing to recognise the legitimacy of the existing political authorities by making demands of them; refusing to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order by occupying a public space without asking for permission, refusing to elect leaders that could then be bribed or co-opted; declaring, however non-violently, that the entire system was corrupt and they rejected it; being willing to stand firm against the state's inevitable violent response – that hundreds of thousands of Americans from Portland to Tuscaloosa began rallying in support, and a majority declared their sympathies.

This is not the first time a movement based on fundamentally anarchist principles – direct action, direct democracy, a rejection of existing political institutions and attempt to create alternative ones – has cropped up in the US. The civil rights movement (at least, its more radical branches), the anti-nuclear movement, the global justice movement ... all took similar directions. Never, however, has one grown so startlingly quickly.

To understand why, we have to understand that there's always been an enormous gap between what those ruling America mean by "democracy", and what that word means to almost anyone else. According to the official version, of course, "democracy" is a system created by the founding fathers, based on checks and balances between president, Congress and judiciary. In fact, nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or Constitution does it say anything about the US being a "democracy". Most defined democracy as collective self-governance by popular assemblies, and as such, they were dead set against it, arguing it would be prejudicial against the interests of minorities (the particular minority that was had in mind here being the rich). They only came to redefine their own republic – modeled not on Athens, but on Rome – as a "democracy" because ordinary Americans seemed to like the word so much.

But what did, and what do, ordinary Americans mean by the word? A system where they get to weigh in on which politicians will run the government? This is what we're always told, but it seems implausible. After all, most Americans loathe politicians, and Occupy and anarchism's gift of democracy | David Graeber | World news | theguardian.com

tend to be skeptical about the very idea of government. If they universally hold it out as a political ideal, it can only be because the American people still sees it, however vaguely, as self-governance – as what the founding fathers tended to *denounce* as either "democracy" or, as they sometimes also put it, "anarchy".

If nothing else, this would help explain the enthusiasm with which Americans have embraced a movement based on directly democratic principles, despite the uniformly contemptuous dismissal of America's media and political class. Most Americans are, politically, deeply conflicted. They tend to combine a deep reverence for freedom with a carefully inculcated, but nonetheless real identification with the army and police. Few are actual anarchists; few even know what "anarchism" means. It is not clear how many would ultimately wish to discard the state and capitalism entirely.

But one thing overwhelming numbers of Americans do feel is that something is terribly wrong with their country, that its key institutions are controlled by an arrogant elite, that radical change of some kind is long since overdue. They're right. It's hard to imagine a political system so systematically corrupt – one where bribery, on every level, has been made completely legal. The outrage is appropriate. The problem was, up until 17 September, the only side of the spectrum willing to propose radical solutions of any sort was the right. But <u>Occupy Wall Street</u> has changed that: democracy has broken out.

Sign up for the Guardian Today

Our editors' picks for the day's top news and commentary delivered to your inbox each morning.

Sign up for the daily email

More from the Guardian What's this? More from around the

V

theguardian

Kedition

<u>There's more to fantasy than the elves and orcs of</u>	web
<u>Tolkien</u> 11 Oct 2013	John McCain: He Beat Us in War but Never in
India seizes armed ship owned by American 'anti-	<u>Battle</u> (Business News and Journal)
piracy'security firm 13 Oct 2013	The New Sony Xperia Z - Preposterously High
Catholics incensed as German bishop of Limburg	<u>Resolution</u> (The Independent)
builds palace fit for a pope 10 Oct 2013	<u>What is the Future of Pseudoscience?</u> (Random
Who should judge whether Snowden's leaked secrets	Rationality)
are too sensitive to report? 13 Oct 2013	<u>The desktop is (pretty much) dead</u> (CSC)
<u>Why is the left obsessed by the Daily Mail?</u> 12 Oct	UK/Syria volunteer (British Red Cross)
2013	, ,

Ads by Google

<u>Make Your Own Website</u> An Easy Way To Build A Website. Start Your Free Trial At hibu Today <u>business.hibu.co.uk/Websites</u> What's this?

Is Jesus Really God?Scholars examine the facts about Jesus' claims to be GodY-Jesus.comHawaiian TranslationStudents Get Fast Access to Definition & More w/ Dictionary Appwww.DictionaryBoss.com

© 2013 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.