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SPECIAL SECTION MEDITATION

## Struggling over procedures and other interventions

A comment on David Graeber's  
“Anthropology and the rise of the  
professional-managerial class”

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Because David Graeber is known as a bold, iconoclastic thinker, one can easily forget that there is something quite *classic* or conventionally *anthropological* in the way that he works. Rereading *Toward an anthropological theory of value* (2001) recently, I saw Graeber make the simplest but most fundamental set of assertions of what Ghassan Hage (2012) calls a “critical anthropology”: insisting (I paraphrase) that, “Our world is not the only world. There are other ways to do things, to organize our lives, to be. Another world is possible. How might we reimagine it?” In pursuing that reimagining, Graeber not only draws—and encourages readers to draw—on the corpus of anthropology as an “archive of social possibilities.” He also approaches anthropology historically. He realizes that the historical moment when worlds are described and theories about those worlds are developed matters: certain concerns seem compelling, and that shapes what it is possible to think. So, in that same text, Graeber revisits Marcel Mauss and his work on the gift, situating him in his time, asking whom and what was he thinking with/alongside? Whom and what was he thinking against, arguing with? Graeber wants to recover Mauss as a socialist thinker and visionary whose attempts to understand “the relations between interest and generosity, freedom and obligation, persons and things” (Graeber 2001: 164) were inspired by debates over socialism and capitalism in the early postwar period, and especially in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. I, too, have been looking more closely at Mauss’ life and work, as



part of my attempt to grasp the diverse intellectual, artistic, and political movements in interwar Europe which formed the wider context of the early years of the League of Nations' functioning. In my work on the petitions sent in by Bulgarian or Bulgaro-Macedonian choirs, youth clubs, women's groups, and refugee brotherhoods to the League of Nations in the 1920s, demanding justice or political autonomy for Macedonia, and on the encounters they generated with international bureaucrats, state diplomats, and concerned world citizens and proto-NGOs, I have been struck by the way this first institutionalization of the "international" (Kennedy 1987) was a project invested with diverse dreams, imaginations, and visions, from those of the most hard-nosed realpolitik statesmen to those of visionary socialists. Tracking the everyday practices of "minority treaty supervision" carried out by the Minorities Section of the League Secretariat, moreover, I have noticed the unpredictable trajectories of petitions and the often unintended consequences of bureaucratic and political interventions (see, *inter alia*, Cowan 2003, 2007, 2010). Looking at the documents, texts, images, produced at the time, one sees the messiness and uncertainty—it might so easily have unfolded differently. An ethnographic eye on this other place, or other time, is an approach toward anthropology that I share with Graeber, a sense that the details matter; they always make a difference.

Given Graeber's previously demonstrated commitment to the nitty-gritty of ethnographic and historical detail as the foundation for analysis, I find "Anthropology and the rise of the professional-managerial class" frustrating. What he refers to as "preliminary reflections" set out, in fact, a large, multistranded, and somewhat unwieldy argument about the profound cultural and material effects of neoliberalism since the 1970s, as a context for understanding not only the transformations in "the contemporary university," but also anthropologists' overall failure to intervene against them. A central thread is that academics, as one section of the middle class, and, specifically, as part of a professional-managerial class (PMC), came to be persuaded to see the world through the eyes of the now-allied financial and corporate elite, thus enabling the university to become a place for the consolidation and reproduction of their own class position, and no longer a place for genuine contestation of the now hegemonic ideology of the market. Anthropologists, for all their radical pretensions, contributed to this, according to Graeber. Caught up in the solipsism of the reflexive turn, paralyzed by guilt over the discipline's complicity with colonialism, and reduced to obsessively publishing ritual condemnations of the irredeemably compromised nature of anthropological knowledge, anthropologists failed to pay attention to the new face of neocolonialism unfolding under their noses: structural adjustment, grossly inequitable terms of trade, ecological devastation. Graeber is right about the excesses of the reflexive turn, although his wholesale dismissal forgets the important work it did in forcing us to consider the political conditions in which knowledge is produced.

Graeber's assertions are often insightful but just as often tendentious. He is making a big, polemical argument, through which, in true Graeberian style, he hopes to provoke us into debate and into action. To the extent that his argument proceeds through generalization and caricature, though, it may not only alienate some readers, but also inhibit analysis of what is actually going on. To take just one example: Graeber wonders how academics have come to accept things like the marketization



of education and the introduction of policies of overt violence against dissent as simple, inevitable realities. I, in turn, wonder where he's been for the last twenty years. To talk about "acceptance" of marketization is to gloss over three decades of anguished battles between academics and university senior managements, and between academics and the government, over its wisdom and justice. Graeber simply ignores the enormous battles that have been going on in committee rooms, in board rooms, in the public meetings that academics have demanded to debate things with vice chancellors, even in marking boycotts and strikes. Little of this has ever reached the headlines, since we're not talking about fighting in the streets. But it is simply nonsensical to suggest that academics accepted either marketization or the militarization of campuses as inevitable.

Graeber's story of the transformation of higher education is thus much too smooth. By defining academics as complicit from the start, by virtue of class loyalty, he is able to gloss over the tangle of responses that the various policies of marketization generated: reasoned argument, vociferous dissent, reluctant compliance, savvy game playing, quiet foot dragging, and occasional, one supposes—though I've never encountered it—enthusiasm. In fact, the ideological argument of neoliberal reform has failed spectacularly to convince most academics. Rather than arriving so quickly at this conclusion of "acceptance," therefore, would it not be better to try to grasp the actual intricacies of the new games of power: of how changes have been, and continue to be, pushed through—at the level of government, within the sector, and within individual universities—despite opposition? What are the strategies and techniques used by those pushing them through which have left in many academics a feeling of diminished agency, of having knocked their heads against the wall to no effect?

It's odd that Graeber has nothing to say about this, since he has written perceptively about bureaucratic micropractices elsewhere (2012). Here, though, he takes "proceduralism" as a kind of explanation. He sees its "prevailing ethos" as a "reason" for academics' "indifference" (e.g., to police violence against protesting students). He portrays academics as not only passive and compliant in the face of rules and procedures, but also duped by them. As he explains, "According to the prevailing ethos of proceduralism, it's almost impossible for *any* legally authorized act, even if it does involve knocking out the teeth of peaceful protestors, to be considered violent, and equally difficult for any extralegal procedure . . . to be considered anything else." If Graeber actually believes this, he has clearly gotten carried away with his own rhetoric. But more importantly, his hostility to proceduralism causes him to be uninterested in procedures, and thus to pass over one of the major ways that academics, in their engagement with the humdrum workings of their institutions, attempt to intervene.

Contra Graeber, in other words, I would argue that at my university, and I suspect at all the others, rules and procedures are precisely what are struggled over. At Sussex, they have become a key site of struggle between senior management and university staff, and, more broadly, between a managerialist and a democratic approach to running the university. I agree with a point implied in Graeber's argument, although not articulated explicitly: that university managers are increasingly using rules to entrench their own power, and in quite an aggressive way. But we need to look at the micropractices through which this is carried out, and the ethical

and legal tangles that face those who would contest them, so as to understand what is going on ethnographically, and to provide opportunities to intervene—yes, procedurally—and perhaps even to alter the terms of the debate.

At Sussex, one immediately noticeable aspect of the changes put in place since the arrival of the current vice chancellor in 2007 was a “walling off” or “closing down” of certain spaces and processes that had hitherto been accessible to a wider range of academics, often from all levels. We first noticed this in the many innovations that the management introduced in the hiring processes, starting in September 2008, for the twelve new heads of schools created under the latest restructuring, which at key moments excluded or reduced the input of academics in favor of that of the senior managers. For instance, the vice chancellor appointed the academic members to head of school (HOS) appointment panels, whereas formerly these individuals had been elected by their academic peers. No other member of the school was allowed to learn the HOS applicants’ names, much less meet them—for reasons of “equal opportunity” and “confidentiality.” The most egregious affront occurred when the academic members of HOS panels learned that they had not been invited to or even alerted about the shortlisting meeting, on the grounds that this was unnecessary, since shortlisting was a “technical” matter of matching candidates to selection criteria. When academics—and not just the panellists—reacted with furious indignation, the academic panellists were allowed to see the applications and join the shortlisting process. One step forward, two steps back.

A second example of “closing down” concerns a definitive moment in the longer-term disempowerment of Senate and its demotion to an “advisory” body. On March 18, 2009, University of Sussex students created a “silent protest,” lining the right-hand side of the four flights of stairs which senators would climb that morning to reach Senate’s meeting room. Students had taped their mouths shut and were holding signs: from the plea “Don’t silence me” to the warning “If the proposal is implemented, Senate will seem to the Community little more than a rubber stamp for VCEG [Vice Chancellor’s Executive Group].” The issue under debate was a proposal by the Sussex management to reduce the size of Senate. They had called for the number of elected seats to be slashed by 66 percent and for the number of unelected seats—most of them held by those with management roles—to rise and become a majority. At least twenty senators spoke out forcefully against the proposal, condemning what they saw as an attempt to make the Sussex Senate “a tool of management.” Management’s proposal failed. Although the Working Group set up to decide on the matter later arrived at a compromise of a smaller and thus, inevitably, less representative Senate, it did retain a majority of elected seats. It was a small victory within a larger defeat.

In the redistribution of power away from academics and toward a managerial core, “confidentiality” has been offered as a justification. But there have been disagreements over which processes and procedures it pertains to, where and when it is appropriate, whom it ostensibly protects versus whom it actually protects, who can decide to waive or lift it. Two further brief examples convey such contestations. The first pertains to an attempt to revise understandings of the character of Senate. At its November 2013 meeting, Senate was updated on the new provision on confidentiality in the revised Standing Orders. It read:



Although the agenda, minutes and supplementary papers may be widely circulated for informational purposes, the actual proceedings of the meeting itself are private and statements made by individuals during the meeting are confidential. This is to protect freedom of expression in the conduct of the meetings of Senate. Should members of Senate wish to report discussion at Senate to third parties, they should do so in a way that respects these principles. If in doubt, guidance should be sought from the Secretary in this regard.

A number of senators objected to what they saw as the attempt to introduce both surveillance and censorship of their descriptions of Senate proceedings to their colleagues, although the senior management insisted that this was not their intention. Equally startling to many was the attempt to redefine Senate proceedings as “private,” which ran utterly counter to their understanding of Senate as the university community’s primary space for public deliberation of any and all university matters.

A second example: in the context of Senate’s consideration in June 2013 of a revision of university regulations pertaining to student discipline, where the new regulations understandably retained the “confidentiality” of disciplinary procedures, some senators insisted that such confidentiality should be understood to be aimed at protecting the student, and not protecting (i.e., potentially covering up) the acts—or alleged misdeeds—of the university, and that the student concerned could opt to lift confidentiality. Although this interpretation received considerable support from the Senate floor, some months later, when “the Sussex Five” were charged with disciplinary offences in early December 2013 after a brief occupation of a university conference center, it was ignored. In the letter calling them to the disciplinary hearing, the students were formally instructed that all information pertaining to the university’s charges against them was confidential. Ominously, they were “asked not to make any contact with other students, and please note that any incidents of contact may be reported to and considered by the panel in their hearing.” When one student asked whether it was his decision to choose whether or not to make his documents public, he did not receive a direct reply. Rather, he was reminded that he had “a duty . . . to maintain a standard of conduct which [is] not harmful to the work, good order or good name of the University.” One can only imagine the anguish and fury this produced in the students.

Engagement with university governing processes has taught me that intervention should not always be aimed at changing procedures. As a senator during an earlier round of “Sussex Against the Cuts” protests in 2010 and attending a late March Senate a few weeks after a brief student occupation of the Sussex House administration building, I saw that the most powerful way of calling the senior management to account for their handling of student protest was to demand that they follow the existing regulations appropriately. Thus, senators introduced a motion condemning as “disproportionate and inappropriate” the use of an existing statute to suspend and exclude six students, echoing a letter sent to the vice chancellor from thirteen members of the law faculty concerned about the legality of the suspensions and mentioning possible violations of the Human Rights Act. Senators also called for the injunction against protest—a state of exception granted by a

high court order—to be lifted. That such demands could be made and had to be answered in the public space of Senate was crucial. And yet I also saw how unwelcome collective decisions could be evaded. When a motion calling for an independent inquiry into the March 3, 2010 student occupation of Sussex House—both the event and its handling by the university—passed, surprisingly, by a large majority of that same Senate, a number of us were cautiously optimistic. But the inquiry never happened. Assuring Senate that it was merely an “advisory” body, the vice chancellor passed the ball to Council, and instead of an inquiry, a Working Group of three members of Council was set up to hear the testimony of various individuals, including that of three senators (one of whom was me) and the Student Union president, with the Council secretary taking notes. Within the context of wider governance concerns that we raised, a key issue for students and staff was an allegation of serious and potentially criminal wrongdoing on the part of one of the senior management during the protests, a charge that was widely reported in the media and on the blogosphere at the time. As it turned out, the “legal” character of that allegation became a reason to wrap our meeting in confidentiality: the chair of Council refused to allow a set of written minutes to be produced. The Working Group’s report back to Council in November 2010 is recorded in an anodyne minute: “Mr xxx reported that the Senators had expressed no concerns about the processes or procedures that had been followed. The residual issue was one of a legal nature which was beyond the scope of the remit of the Group.” Since such concerns were the very core of our discussion, we had no choice but to challenge this minute. Thus, having begun by transmitting Senate’s conviction that an independent inquiry was essential, and finding Council unwilling to initiate one, we three senators found ourselves having to struggle even for our dissent at the ways our views had been represented to be registered in the public record. Calling on an ally at the Council to bring our contestation to that body, and then, raising it ourselves at the next Senate through a prepared statement, we became awkward reminders of an issue that many wished would be forgotten. Supportive fellow senators, on the other hand, expressed incredulity that such a blatant misrepresentation could have been crafted in the first place. Subsequently, now that I am an elected member of the Council, one of my regular interventions is to read minutes carefully, and challenge them when they are inaccurate, incomplete, or—as they are often purposely composed to be—opaque. These small battles over the public record seem to me extraordinarily important.

At the same time that more and more aspects of our individual and collective academic practice are opened to managerial scrutiny through more and more wide-ranging forms of audit, a parallel closing down of particular spaces of action and decision making to academic scrutiny has been and continues to be engineered. Arguments about confidentiality are being deployed, but whom and what exactly does confidentiality protect? An individual member of the faculty, staff, or student body may find the argument for confidentiality, in this or that specific case, compelling, or merely a pretext for covering up things which ought to be revealed. Either way, in challenging confidentiality, she may find herself entangled in a quasi-legal regime of university statutes, rules, and regulations, and sometimes a properly legal regime, with the threat of sanction, punishment, or exclusion.



I would not deny that the situation in the university is bleak; indeed, most of the stories I have told are those about failure. Nevertheless, although the scope for action for students and nonmanagement academics is very circumscribed, it does exist. Along with responding to the ruses of power, academics might take up the prefiguration approach that Graeber suggests as a parallel path for action. We could take the cue from our students (see Marotta 2014). I think it is no coincidence that in the last round of student protests at Sussex, which have contested both the wider marketization of higher education and the plans to privatize campus services, affecting 235 workers, anthropology students have been numerous and vocal, and (along with international relations) the best-represented discipline. I'm willing to bet that what they have taken from their studies of anthropology is the classic but important message that "other ways of doing, thinking, and being are possible," and that this fact can be used to think critically about the institutions and the social and political relations in their own world. When the students occupied the conference center from February to April 2013, they eventually came to make it a space of prefiguration in much the way that Graeber has called for, in that they attempted to "creat[e] social relations and decision-making processes that at least approximate those that might exist in the kind of society [they'd] like to bring about" (Graeber, this volume)<sup>1</sup> Students collectively organized the everyday activities necessary for the occupation (food, study, cleaning, exercise, events, entertainment, media, public relations, outreach to the 235 workers affected by campus privatization) through daily meetings, and action and strategy groups open to all participants. They strove to maintain a horizontal, egalitarian movement, avoiding fixed roles and the emergence of leaders. Students welcomed visitors, and used the conference space for a continuing, open-ended discussion on the future of the university, talks by public figures supportive of their campaign, dancing, a photo exhibition of "the 235," and floor space for lecturers who held their seminars there. The conference room—essentially one large space which could be subdivided with folding screens, plus a verandah—attracted students, faculty, and administrative and professional staff from different parts of the university for informal visits and to attend the organized events, bringing into contact people who had been separated by a decade of restructurings. The space appropriated by the occupying students in the name of the campus as "community" was, in fact, what allowed the community to begin to knit itself back together, enabling people to get to know each other again.

Graeber's account of the politics of academia has no knots. I, on the other hand, see knots and potential entanglements everywhere. The university is an enormously complex, entangled institution, and if we want to turn it toward our purposes, we need to work through its rules and procedures: sometimes demanding that they are followed, sometimes seeking to challenge or change them, and sometimes deciding to disobey them. Our choices for action frequently pose dilemmas and place us in double binds with regard to loyalties, legalities, and ethics. Importantly, as anthropologists, we can turn our ethnographic eye toward the procedures to discern and analyze how things are working and to imagine how they might be and work otherwise.

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1. For a fuller analysis of the prefigurative dimensions of the occupation, see Nişancioğlu and Pal (2014). On prefiguration more generally, see Maeckelbergh (2009).



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