

David Graeber, scholar, anarchist and intellectual leader of Occupy Wall Street, dies at 59

By **Matt Schudel**

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David Graeber, an anthropologist and self-proclaimed anarchist who was an intellectual leader of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and wrote books challenging established views about jobs, wealth and social hierarchies, died Sept. 2 at a hospital in Venice. He was 59.

His wife, Nika Dubrovsky, said on Twitter that he died while on vacation. The immediate cause was internal bleeding. “We are waiting for results of the autopsy,” she added, “in order to establish the intermediate and underlying cause of death.”

Dr. Graeber was both a scholar of anarchism — technically, a society without a form of government — and an advocate of it in the public sphere. He was jailed during anti-globalization protests and once was struck by a plastic bullet fired by police during a demonstration in Quebec City. He kept the projectile in his pocket.

A onetime professor at Yale University, where his teaching contract was not renewed in 2005, sparking a public outcry, Dr. Graeber later had a distinguished academic career in England, most recently as a professor at the London School of Economics. His articles were downloaded millions of times, and his books became sellers.

“It’s possible,” a [2013 article](#) in the Chronicle of Higher Education noted, “that, given his activism and his writings, he is the most influential anthropologist in the world.”

His scholarly specialty was “value theory,” or how countries and social groups decide what is important. He was particularly interested in the concept of public and private debt, [which he elaborated](#) in his 2011 book, “[Debt: The First 5,000 Years](#).” It became an unexpected commercial success and strongly influenced other anthropologists.

He believed that the U.S. economic system relies heavily on keeping people indebted and that debt has a harmful effect on everything from homeownership and farming to insurance and education. In modern society, Dr. Graeber said, debt becomes a “contract that is ultimately enforceable through the threat of force.”

He called debt “an assault on the very idea of community, and an assault on the commitments that we make to each other through the medium of government.” He pointed out that in some societies — and even in the Lord’s Prayer — the forgiveness of debt is considered a social and moral virtue.

The same year he published his book on debt, Dr. Graeber became a major voice in the [emerging Occupy Wall Street movement](#), which began as grass-roots opposition to income inequality and corporate power. The movement, with squatters taking over parks and other public spaces, spread from New York to other cities around the country.

Dr. Graeber helped coin the movement's catchy slogan, "We are the 99 percent," as a way to highlight the vast amount of wealth controlled by the richest 1 percent of the population. More crucially, he helped lead a meeting in which it was determined that the movement's decisions would be made by consensus, rather than in a hierarchical fashion. It was a core principle of anarchism, which Dr. Graeber saw as a form of cooperative self-government, not as a lawless, violent society.

Others have questioned the long-term significance of Occupy Wall Street, but in his 2013 book "The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement," Dr. Graeber pronounced it a "revival of revolutionary imagination."

"The movement did not succeed despite the anarchist element," he added. "It succeeded because of it."

David Rolfe Graeber was born Feb. 12, 1961, in New York City. He grew up in an apartment building in Manhattan's Chelsea district "suffused with radical politics."

His father, who fought in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s against the forces of Gen. Francisco Franco, worked in printing plants. His mother was a garment worker and onetime union activist. Dr. Graeber said he was an anarchist by the time he was 16.

"I always say that the reason I ended up being an anarchist is because most people don't think anarchism is a bad idea — they think it's insane," Dr. Graeber told the British publication *New Statesman* in 2018. "But if you grow up in an environment where it's not seen as insane, and you know that's not the case, what reason is there not to be an anarchist?"

Academically precocious, he developed an interest in anthropology at age 11, through what he called his "weird hobby" of translating ancient Mayan inscriptions. He received a scholarship to the private Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., then majored in anthropology at the State University of New York at Purchase, graduating in 1984.

As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he received a Fulbright fellowship to conduct research in Madagascar, off the eastern coast of Africa. He concentrated on a rural community in which the residents lived in an egalitarian, anarchist society, without police or a formal government, making decisions as a group. He received a doctorate in anthropology in 1996.

Two years later, Dr. Graeber began teaching at Yale. In 2005, three years before he would have been eligible for tenure, his teaching contract was not renewed. He said he was never told why, but he believed it was because of his political activism. More than 4,500 students and anthropology professors from all over the world signed petitions on Dr. Graeber's behalf, but the decision was final.

He moved to London, where he taught at Goldsmiths, a division of the University of London, before joining the London School of Economics faculty in 2013.

In April, Dr. Graeber was married to Dubrovsky, an artist. A complete list of survivors could not be confirmed.

In addition to his books on debt and Occupy Wall Street, Dr. Graeber published "The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy" (2015), in which he wrote that bureaucracies, whether in government or private enterprises, imposed "impersonal rules and regulations" that "can only operate if they are backed up by the threat of force."

As an example, he cited the case of Eric Garner, who died in police custody in New York in 2014 as a result of an

attempt to enforce a tax on cigarettes.

In “The Utopia of Rules,” Dr. Graeber also maintained that the U.S. democratic form of government had been, in his view, improperly equated with the capitalist economic system.

“ ‘Democracy’ thus came to mean the market; ‘bureaucracy’ in turn, government interference with the market,” he wrote, “and this is pretty much what the word continues to mean.”

In 2018, Dr. Graeber published another book about the modern working world called “Bull---- Jobs,” based on an earlier article that went viral. He wrote that in 1930 economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that technological advances would reduce the average workweek in the advanced world to 15 hours by the 21st century.

Dr. Graeber tried to find out why that didn’t happen. He concluded that millions of people — particularly in corporate law, finance, public relations, human resources, academic and health administration — had jobs with no real purpose. He described such a job as “paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence.”

He cited a poll indicating that almost 40 percent of British workers believed their jobs had no meaningful purpose. (Critics pointed out that the same poll indicated that 63 percent of workers were happy in their jobs.)

“Basic economics is based on the assumption that we’re rational beings,” Dr. Graeber told The Washington Post in 2018. “We go off and try to maximize our utility, so by that logic, people who are being paid a nice salary to do nothing all day should be delighted. But they’re not.”

Dr. Graeber’s solution was to have the government to provide a guaranteed annual income that would allow people the freedom to find their own purpose in life. His book made a commercial splash, despite uneven reviews.

When asked if anarchist professors of anthropology belonged on the list of pointless “bull---- jobs,” Dr. Graeber told The Post: “I would go with the same market logic as anyone else. Lots of people are taking the class. I think there’s nothing more important than understanding the world that we live in.”

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