



Review article

## Anthropology's value(s)

A review of David Graeber. 2002. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave. pp. xiii + 337. Notes, references cited, index.

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'We are in an ethnographic period', suggested a colleague, a historian of anthropology, as we discussed current trends in anthropology. By this he meant that the theoretical ferment of the 1980s and early 1990s had given way not to lack of theory, but to a focus on working out theoretical insights ethnographically rather than creating new theoretical syntheses. At the time I shared his sense that the exciting changes wrought by the critique of the culture concept (from the point of view of anti-essentialist critiques coming from post-modernism, feminism, practice theory, the critique of nationalism, and globalization theory) had by-and-large been integrated into our anthropological practice, and we were now willing to tease these ideas out in their multiplex ethnographic implications. Not that there's anything wrong with that . . . But I wish at the time that I could have pointed him to David Graeber's *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dream* as one among a number of notable recent exceptions to this historical trend. Graeber's book is notable if only for its bold attempt to provide a new theory of everything, or at least a lot of things, that has been on the mind of recent anthropology through a reworking of classical anthropological approaches and detailed ethnographic case studies. While ostensibly a contribution to exchange theory, another attempt to wed Marx and Mauss, and through such a union to revamp the underthought, or misthought, concept of 'value', this book, in fact, tackles many longstanding anthropological chestnuts, from magic and religion to power and relativism, from structure and history to desire and dreams. At the same time, Graeber charts an agenda for anthropology which situates human action at the center of its theorizing in a way quite distinct from recent post-modern approaches. What perhaps is even more striking is that Graeber is committed to wedding anthropological theory to *political* as well as ethnographic practice, as he has been an active participant in the anti-corporate globalization movement (see

Graeber, 2002). Graeber writes with a heartening faith in the continued use of social theory (and a sense of humor!) in addressing political movements to change the current neo-liberal world order. While some chapters focus more directly on the politics of theory than others, the overall political thrust is woven through the entire argument of this book. It is particularly heartening to read a book such as this at the present moment, a moment in which President 'Dubya' has declared 'victory' in Iraq while pushing through more massive tax cuts. And in which government seems to be conceived by many as simply the power to 'protect' Americans from the multiple bogeymen great and small (terrorists under the bed, SARS at the ballpark) that the media seems endlessly capable of propagating. One imagines that Graeber would have some interesting things to say about the relationship of desire and value in a culture of fear such as ours. But let me begin at the beginning.

In Greece the word '*timi*' means honor, which has been typically seen as the most important value in Greek village society. Honor is often characterized in Greece as an open-handed generosity and blatant disregard for monetary costs and counting. And yet the same word also means 'price' as in the price of a pound of tomatoes. This slippage between values and value – which Bourdieu has pointed to in his notion of the relation between symbolic and economic capital – is also suggestive of what Graeber is trying to get at in rethinking anthropological theories of value. So what's wrong with anthropological theories of value anyway? In two chapters Graeber traces the impasses of an earlier history of theorizing value, and more recent approaches, which, he argues, by-and-large suffer from the same deficiencies, particularly in handling human action and desire. He contrasts economic theories, encapsulated in the never-quite-resolved formalist/substantivist debate, with structuralist theories, which defined value in terms of linguistic 'meaning' rather than 'importance'. While skewering the 'maximizing individual' who haunts formalist approaches, he notes that the latter two approaches foundered on the question of motivation, how does society get people to follow its rules? Graeber suggests that missing in these debates is a consideration of Clyde Kluckhohn's 'comparative values project', which, for all its shortcomings 'at least open[ed] up the possibility of looking at cultures as not just different ways of perceiving the world, but as different ways of imagining what life ought to be like – as moral projects, one might say' (pp. 21–2).

These same problems crop up, according to Graeber, in the formalist economism of Appadurai's notion of an innate drive to make all things exchangeable commodities and the mirror image of that, Annette Weiner's most difficult to exchange 'inalienable possessions'. In both cases value is a function of how much one person wishes to obtain an object or another person wishes to keep it. If one sees value as a creation of exchange, one ends up, intentionally or not, with 'anthropology as it might have been written by Milton Friedman' (p. 33), and this is a failing that Graeber lays at the feet of much of what passes for post-modern radicalism. Graeber is looking, by contrast, for a theory that in some way comes to terms with what many anthropologists recognize, that the specific history accumulated by an object in its production, exchange and consumption is in some way crucial to its 'value'. And that its 'value' has some relation to larger societal 'values'. Price and honor, so to speak.

Graeber comes to his own approach by asking: what is it that is being recognized in the 'history' of an object? Here Graeber draws from the ideas of Nancy Munn and

Terence Turner to argue that it is prior human actions that are in some sense congealed in objects that make them valuable. Thus it is 'action' itself which is the source of value, even if people do not recognize it as such. As Graeber puts it:

Value emerges in action; it is the process by which a person's invisible potency – their capacity to act – is transformed into concrete, perceptible form . . . Rather than having to choose between the desirability of objects and the importance of human relations, one can now see both as refractions of the same thing. Commodities have to be produced . . . social relations have to be created and maintained; all of this requires an investment of human time and energy, intelligence, concern. If one sees value as a matter of the relative distribution of *that*, then one has a common denominator. One invests one's energies in those things one considers most important, or most meaningful. (p. 45)

Thus Graeber suggests a labor theory of value, but one more broadly conceived to include all human creative actions. However, Marxist concepts remain useful: surplus value can be broadened to include the appropriation of creative actions of all sorts, and fetishism the way that objects become for some not simply tokens of value but seem to embody value or become the source of value themselves. This works very nicely for heirlooms, relics, and other inalienable possessions. One thinks, for example, of magical swords such as Excalibur in the western tradition: their value, which seems intrinsic to the items themselves, is in fact a function of the previous actions taken with them, battles won, towns defended and so on. Indeed, in a later chapter, Graeber suggests that there is a hierarchy of objects based precisely on how much the source of their value is fetishized. At one end is heirloom objects, or in a capitalist economy, perhaps, capital itself, as the ultimate, mystified value. At the other end is, for example, cooked food in most small-scale societies. People are quite aware of the value of an offer of food because they know the labor that has gone into producing it. When people recognize food generosity, they are recognizing human actions, rather than fetishized value, although as Graeber points out elsewhere, they may in some cases mystify the source of the generosity, ascribing it to men or elders rather than women or younger people who performed the actions.

What does this approach mean for our understanding of 'society' and its relationship to individual desire? Graeber suggests that in a sense people create society in their imagination in the process of pursuing value. 'Society' is the coordination of individual value projects. This is because in Graeber's theory, value is always comparative and must be publicly recognized. Invoking the metaphor of the stage at a number of points, he suggests that society is the potential audience 'of everyone whose opinion of you matters in some way' (p. 76). This is not the same as saying that society is a collection of individuals, though he is at pains not to posit pre-existing 'structures' that exist prior to action (p. 77). Instead he speaks of 'totalities', or 'wholes', which the actors imagine to exist to give meaning to their actions, whether that whole be the Kula ring, the Kayapo system of 'beautiful names', or the Gross National Product of the US. To illustrate this, Graeber draws an example from Munn of how cultural definitions of value that underlie Gawan Kula exchange are reproduced in humble daily gestures such as the giving of food to a guest: 'Implicit in even such a simple gesture lies a whole cosmology, a whole set of distinctions between the heaviness of gardening and garden products (owned by

women), and the lightness and beauty of shells and other circulating valuables (which reproduce the fame of men). This same structure of meaning is reproduced on ever-higher levels of what Munn calls 'intersubjective space-time'; that is, new levels that are created by more dramatic and more broadly recognized forms of action' (p. 82). We might equally think of Graeber's approach to 'value and values' in terms of the current choices being made in US society: massive cuts in education along with massive increases in military spending and 'homeland security', and how these relate to more mundane realities in which we are asked to celebrate militant masculinity by supporting our troops and shunning the *Dixie Chicks*. Seeing these choices in terms of a politics of value would no doubt be a useful framing device.

Thus Graeber links his ideas on value to more familiar anthropological notions of the relationship of cultural microcosms and macrocosms, and gives a hint of what a Graeberian ethnography might look like. Several questions about his approach arise at this point, however. The first concerns the status of 'totalities'. The 'structures of meaning' mentioned in the last paragraph sound suspiciously to me like the 'structures' that precede action, which he wants to avoid. People create value, I would think, not just based on imagined futures, but on imagined pasts as well. Moreover, one wonders how much the Gawan 'totality' is shared by men and women. This is simply to take the claim that female garden products are heavy, that is, bad, while male shells are light, that is, good, and to pose the question 'according to whom?' This question seems particularly pertinent if we go along with the idea that value is not found in the instantiation of pre-existing structures, but in the importance of human actions. Here I am raising a more general point: reliant as Graeber is on the approaches of 1980s Chicago-school anthropology, his text can at times be decidedly unpostmodern in its presentation of 'outsider' descriptions of culture without examining the absence of alternative 'voices'. Graeber recognizes this problem, noting that he is somewhat uncomfortable with the concept of totalities, and that in any real situation 'there are likely to be any number of such imaginary totalities at play'. Imposing one as dominant brings back in politics and power, and politics becomes, in his view, a struggle about the meaning of life. At the same time he warns us against the (post-modern) politics of rejecting all totalities out of hand, which simply blinds us to the realities of the World Market, a gigantic totalizing system of value in its own right. He goes on to suggest that we must consider totalities as part of our political project: 'Any notion of freedom . . . demands *both* resistance against the imposition of any totalizing view of what society or value must be like, but also recognition that *some* kind of regulating mechanism will have to exist, and therefore . . . serious thought about what sort will best ensure people are, in fact, free to conceive value in whatever form they wish' (p. 89).

All this within the first 89 pages. Indeed if there was an ideas-per-page index in anthropology, Graeber would no doubt score at the very top. This makes for a certain dizzying quality in reading this book, but also for the sense that one can pick it up and flip to any page and find some food for thought. In the remaining four chapters he explores some of the ideas implicit in his theory of value through extended ethnographic examples. Two of the most important ideas are of the relationship of imminent and visible powers, or as noted earlier 'how invisible potencies are transformed into visible forms', and a development of the notion of the politics of imaginary totalities through an extensive rereading of Mauss's analysis of gift exchange.

In a chapter titled 'Action and Reflection' Graeber begins with a puzzle: why is it that beads have served as a medium of exchange, a kind of 'primitive money' across so many societies? They are, of course, durable, commensurable and portable, but for Graeber what is more important is that they are wearable, or objects of personal adornment. To explain this, he first draws a distinction between two modalities of power in relation to wealth. The first is that of display, or visibility. Through the display of wealth in visible form, particularly on one's body, one exercises a persuasive power, 'meant to inspire in others acts of compliance, homage or recognition . . . by covering themselves with gold, then, kings persuade others to cover them with gold as well' (p. 98–99). Given that, according to Graeber's theory, value is the importance of action, then the king's power of display is a sort of drawing attention to previous actions, congealed in objects of display, and persuading people to carry out similar actions. The second type of power is the opposite of the first: unspecific, not displayed but rather hidden, an invisible potentiality which comes to be associated with the generic power of someone to do things or make things happen in the future. This type of power is ideally represented not by items of adornment but rather by money. Money is generic, typically it has no history. More importantly it lacks all specificity in the present, but could be converted into anything in the future. Drawing on Marx again, Graeber argues that this is what makes people want to hide or hoard money, to hold on to its invisible power, its very invisibility suggesting its infinite potential. This is, as he cites Engels, the magical power of money, that it acts like a magical charm able to transform itself into any desirable or desired object (p. 101). He also suggests that this is why the State has struggled long and hard throughout history to control money, to make it visible by stamping it with its imprimatur, in order to tame this invisible power from coming too much under the control of private individuals. It also suggests to me why in the most market-driven capitalist society in the world, the United States, money is the most generic, colorless and ugly, the least, that is visible to State control. So why beads, then? From their very property, Graeber argues, to slip back and forth between these two forms of wealth, money and adornment, objects of visual display or hidden power, as they are formed into necklaces or other wealth items and then broken up again into their generic constituents, they materialize the human desire for both of these kinds of power.

In an extended chapter entitled 'Marcel Mauss Reconsidered', which could be a book-length essay in its own right, Graeber discusses that much revisited question of the *hau* of the gift, or why gifts must be repaid. While providing a fascinating reanalysis and updating (based on more recent ethnographies) of Mauss's key examples, particularly the Maori and the Kwakwiltl, his main purpose in this chapter is to rehabilitate Mauss's moral vision, his quest for the basis of a socialist society. Thus the key problematic that Graeber wants to investigate is not how the logic of the market and self-interest arose at a certain point in history (though he does offer interesting suggestions linking it to the rise of Christianity), but rather why so many people, even in capitalist societies, find the logic of the market and self-interest repugnant (and why it must be redeemed by the gift, see Carrier, 1990). Thus Mauss would hardly be surprised to learn that the American Dreamtime (Drummond, 1996) of popular movies is filled with images of the rejection of self-interest and the market, from Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*, to Marlon Brando's embrace of values over value in *The Godfather* (see Sutton and Wogan, 2003). So why do gifts have to be repaid? Graeber suggests that a better question would be

when do gifts have to be repaid, because in many circumstances (what Sahlins dubbed 'generalized reciprocity') they do not. Indeed, the gift that has to be repaid, or tit-for-tat gift, has more similarities to market exchange, where the key is to preserve the autonomy/independence of both parties and ensure that social relations can basically be broken off at any time, than it does to the kind of generalized reciprocity that assumes a lifetime, 'communistic' relationship. So the question is how to imagine more of the latter type of relations. Graeber takes the example of the bottle of wine brought to someone hosting you for dinner. While this might be analyzed as 'creating social relations', he suggests the opposite. He notes that in college dorms people live in relatively communistic relations, with people in each other's business, wandering into each other's rooms at will. College apartments are somewhat less so, though it is no big deal if friends drop over at any time. But once one is living in middle-class suburbia the threshold becomes sacred, difficult to cross without preparations and ceremony. Thus the 'gift' in this case marks the attenuation of social relationship rather than its opposite. How does this relate to imagining a socialist society? It's once again a question of the relationship of microcosms and macrocosms. This is why in his activist work for organizations such as *Direct Action Network* and *Ya Basta!* Graeber has focused on the importance of creating (microcosmic) structures of democratic decision-making as a way of bringing into being a more democratic world order (see Graeber, 2002). But his larger point is that it is the communistic relations that humans create even within the heart of market capitalism which allow us to imagine a different totality. As he sums it up:

I am saying all this not to make a plea for some kind of universal *communitas*, or even as a gripe from someone who never knows what wine to buy, but mainly to make a point about critical perspectives. To adopt a critical perspective on a practice or institution . . . is usually a matter of placing it within some larger social totality, in which it can then be seen to play an intrinsic part in the reproduction of certain forms of inequality, alienation, or injustice. That is what Marxists usually accuse Mauss of forgetting to do, and not entirely without reason. But here the Maussian could well reply that for criticism to have any purpose, one must also be able to place *some* practices or institutions within an imaginary totality in which they might *not* contribute to the reproduction of inequality, alienation, or injustice. [Mauss's view] would present us with the possibility that the specter of communism might lurk not only within families and friendships but within the very organization of corporate capitalism itself, or pretty much any situation in which people are united in a common task, and inputs and outputs therefore organized only by the actors' capacities and requirements rather than by any balancing of accounts . . . Even if this is a kind of communism, it remains lodged within larger structures that are anything but egalitarian. But as Mauss also emphasized, it is the presence of such practices and institutions that make it possible for people within the society to see those larger structures as unjust. (p. 227)

Communists under the bed (or the boardroom table). Now that's a vision to provide some sleepless nights to the Bushes, Rumsfelds and Ashcrofts of our current world order.

## References

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