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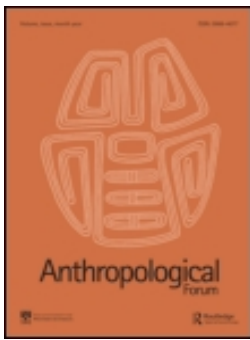
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## Involving Anthropology

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### REVIEW ARTICLE

## David Graeber's *Wunderkammer*, *Debt: The First 5 000 Years*

Bill Maurer<sup>1</sup>

*Debt: The first 5,000 years*, by David Graeber. Melville House, Brooklyn, New York, 2011, 534pp., figures, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-1-933633-86-2 (hardback).

*Graeber's Debt: The First 5 000 Years has generated extensive commentary in the popular press and has captured the imagination of both activists at the barricades and investment fund managers in the City of London. Everyone is captivated by his critique of the myth of primitive barter. Yet it is a puzzle that a core element of his argument—the myth of primordial debt—has been largely overlooked. This review seeks to redress this oversight and in the process to suggest that Graeber's emphasis on violence and enslavement, while compelling, is limited by his quest for origins. Feminist anthropology taught us to set aside the question, 'when did "it" begin' and instead open up to other questions, beyond the limits and biases the quest for origins presupposes. One wishes Graeber had entered the wonder cabinet he constructed in this book, rather than use it to ground a teleology.*

*Keywords: Debt; Credit; Money; Feminism; Origin Studies*

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## Guilt and Debt

I have a confession to make. I may have biased this review by reading others' reviews before embarking on my own. But wait. No, it is even worse than that. I read those other people's reviews—some of them were even bloggers, hardly scholars or philosophers—before I read the book at all. There, I have admitted it. It is difficult to resist, after all, when the Internet is so close to hand and Google can carry me, link by link, down a multitude of paths of opinion, opprobrium, praise, blame and synopsis. But that was my original sin, the origin-ary debt I felt I would have to repay by writing this to you, my reader.

Then I read the book. And something was not quite right. I walked around the house scratching my head for a while. I did not feel quite so indebted any more. I wrote a plaintive email to the editor who had requested this review, subtly trying to get out of doing it because—I had told him inspiration had not hit—because, well, there was something wrong. Something wrong with those reviews, or else with my reading, or else with the book. So, I went back to Google.

I entered, “myth of primordial debt” graeber’. One hit. I typed, “myth of barter” graeber’. ‘About 35 000 hits’, Google replied.

Not content with the results of my searching, I tried just “primordial debt” graeber’ (without the ‘myth’ part) and Google returned over 4 000 results. Glancing at the first page, however, none of the commentators seems to get the point that Graeber is describing another myth, parallel to the myth of barter. Instead, most see Graeber as a proponent of ‘primordial debt theory’.<sup>2</sup>

Not trusting myself or my handwritten notes on the book, I went back to Google, found the online full-text edition of the book, typed in ‘myth of primordial debt’ just to be sure it was his phrase, that he had actually written this, that primordial debt is another myth, like the myth of barter, which we need to begin to understand and undermine if we are to come to grips with the devaluation of the human economy of obligation and regard by the commodity economy of money and debt—and yes, there it was, five times. Hmmm, I said to myself. Now there’s my inspiration. Or at least a starting point.

David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5 000 Years* is an odd, heavy book. One reviewer compares it to Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (Bady 2012). It is not a bad comparison, given the length, the profusion of details of laws, customs and beliefs from near and far, past and present, and the incredible breadth of scholarship it evinces. The first comparison I thought of, however, was with Mauss’s *The Gift*. The latter also has a riot of ethnohistorical examples from the contemporary Arctic to the ancient Vedic. And both share an argumentative logic. Both also almost share a political agenda. Almost, but not quite. And that is why the myth of primordial debt is so important.

Graeber begins with a compelling moral puzzle. Why do we insist that monetary debts be repaid? Repaying debts often excludes the possibility of fulfilling other moral duties. It often results in the suffering and death of innocents. So why do we keep insisting on the repayment of such debts? This is no idle query. While a loan

to a foreign government may be financially insignificant, mere ledger dust, to a multinational, 'too big to fail' bank like Citibank, to the people whose government is charged with repayment, that loan can quite literally represent death. In this regard, Graeber cites the government of Madagascar's cancellation of its mosquito eradication program in order to comply with International Monetary Fund debt conditionalities. Ten thousand people died as a result, he tells us (4).

This is a work about morality, then: the morality not of the market per se but of the nature of debt itself and the compulsion to repay. That compulsion requires a certain kind of debt, however, in order for its own moral logic to make sense. The debt has to be quantifiable, and that quantity has to be measured in terms of the yardstick of money. With the consequences in full view, Graeber seeks to understand how this came to be the case.

In what follows, I will first outline the logical structure of Graeber's argument. I think this is important to do because the claims are important. But the logical structure of Graeber's argument also matters because I think it has been largely missed in the commentary to date. What is striking is the sheer quantity of commentary.<sup>3</sup> Graeber has certainly succeeded in Margaret Mead-like fashion in getting the wider reading public to take note of anthropology. This is to be celebrated (hooray!), and I think it is because everyone can grasp the moral conundrum as Graeber poses it. But the reading public seems to have only gotten half of the argument—the bit that we academic anthropologists still try to get across to our students, semester after semester: 'in the beginning', man [sic] did not create barter. Rather, in the beginning was the Gift. When we do so, we often collapse two notions of origins, and Graeber repeats this anthropological error. We conflate a notion of beginnings as *ab origine*, a primordial, almost metaphysical beginning, with a historical originary, a moment, however defined—*longue durée*, a process unfolding over millennia, or a specific historical event—that changes the world.<sup>4</sup>

Related to the point about origins, the second half of Graeber's argument is really compelling, analytically and politically. That second half of the argument is also problematic, from my own anthropological and political vantage point. In the second section of this review, I provide a gentle critique of the fulcrum of Graeber's argument, literally at the centre of the book and around which the whole argument pivots. This is the position accorded slavery, and, in particular, an originary enslavement of women. It is not only that 30-plus years of feminist anthropology have something to say here that might inflect if not upend Graeber's perspective. It is that there are other models for morality Graeber does not explore revealed by this feminist scholarship, which help broaden the discussion—and the imaginative possibilities—even further. These other models also set aside the question of origins altogether in the service of other analytical and political futures.

Finally, I take to heart Graeber's call—like Mauss's—for a recognition and reevaluation of the alternatives to commodity economy that exist all around us, in plain sight. But in doing so, I cast doubt on another of the key components of his argument: the nature and function of quantification. Graeber concedes too much to it. Quantification can mean many things. Nor is it even clear what number means. Attention to other modes of reckoning may inspire additional arguments against the refusal to act when 10 000 lives do not provide the moral suasion to cancel a monetary debt.

## Two Myths

If the legacy of Graeber's book is a renewed public appreciation that the conventional origin story of money is wrong, then he will very much like Mead go into the history books as an anthropologist who decisively disabused us of some of our cherished beliefs and profoundly changed society forever. As Mead did with gender asymmetry! No, I do not mean to be *quite* so cynical. Graeber's book appeared just as many in the media (especially the business press), in non-governmental organisations, in policy circles and in activist communities were seeking new explanations for capitalism, economics, finance, and what went so horribly wrong as the financial markets teetered and the global economy ground nearly to a halt. Indeed, a colleague in the business press reported to me that he was devouring the book, finding it full of new insights and opening possibilities he had never imagined before. 'Of course', he said, 'I don't know if any of it is true, but it's got a lot of footnotes so I guess he's citing scholarly authority'<sup>7</sup>—this last phrase uttered not with disdain, but certainly not with much credulity toward our academic colleagues.

It is Graeber's debunking of the myth of barter that stands out in the extant commentary on the book. Anthropologists know the story. Philosophers from Aristotle to Adam Smith tell the same tale. People need stuff, and people make stuff, but not everyone makes all the things he or she needs. Trade is invented! But, alas, you do not always have what I need, and vice versa. Jevons identified the chief problem of barter as the rarity of the 'double coincidence of wants' (Jevons 1875). What do we do? We invent money. As more and more people accept it either because it is valuable in itself or because it is backed by some authority or even just by us as a society, all agreeing to use it by convention, money can assume its role as a means of exchange and an arbiter, through the market mechanism, of the value of goods.

As Graeber explains, however, pure barter as such never existed. The myth of barter is a handy story for explaining the origins of money in terms that warrant market theories of price and commodity exchange. But, historically and ethnographically, it does not hold water.

None of this is news to anthropologists. It is, after all, the basis of Mauss's analysis of *The Gift*. In discussing the next myth, however—the one neglected to date in commentary on *Debt*—Graeber is silent on Mauss. The latter only appears later, when Graeber is outlining three modalities of morality, in order to set up the next part of his argument. Instead, Graeber uses the credit theorist of money, A. Mitchell Innes (1913, 1914; see Wray 2004), as his touchstone. Some of the confusion about Graeber's argument here is undoubtedly due to the fact that he aligns the myth of barter with (bad) neoclassical and neoliberal economics. Without the myth of barter, he writes, those conventional forms of economic analysis fall apart. This would lead many a reader to suspect that state and credit theories of money,<sup>5</sup> which do not begin with the myth of barter, represent the good guys in Graeber's tale.



**Figure 1.** Scandinavian tally stick. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

They do and they do not, for Graeber (and for me). And this is for me one of the key analytical contributions of Graeber's book. For Graeber suggests that state and credit theories of money end up positing another myth: the myth of primordial debt.

Put briefly: by (correctly) positing that money is essentially 'an accounting tool' (46) that measures any debts, state and credit theorists (correctly) demystify the money of the barter myth which spontaneously emerges to make trade more convenient. Instead, money is anything that people are willing to accept to denote and settle each other's debts. It does not even need to be an object. It can be a ledger or series of tallies on a stick (Figure 1). It is 'not the measure of the value of an object, but the measure of one's trust in other human beings' (47).

So far, so good. The problem with state and credit theories is the next step. Why would I consent to tally my debt with you in the first place? Why even open up the ledger book to record credits and debts? This is the 'state' part of 'state and credit' theories. The state warrants it, and, crucially, accepts whatever this money is (tallies or substances) for final settlement of debts. If you do not settle with me, I can appeal to the state to compel you to do so. But there is more. The state claims this authority as final arbiter of debt settlement by compelling its citizens to pay taxes in its money. Why would a state do this? To supply standing armies, which as a side effect creates markets, which in turn creates wealth for the state. By levying taxes and accepting only state money as final payment, the state creates the conditions for everyday people to need to accumulate state money, if only to pay it back to the state in turn (49–51).

The 'weak link' according to Graeber of state and credit theories is 'by what right' states can demand subjects pay taxes in the first place. And here comes primordial debt theory. Graeber attributes it to certain French theorists (Michel Aglietta, Andre Orléans, Bruno Théret), but does not mention Mauss here (or many other exponents of this style of theorising). The primordial debt is to society itself, indeed it 'is the essence of society itself' (56). And, '[i]f the king has simply taken over guardianship of that primordial debt we all owe to society for having created us, this provides a very neat explanation for why the government feels it has the right to make us pay taxes. Taxes are just a measure of our debt to the society that has created us' (59).

But the state-credit theory, like the barter theory, is founded on a myth. The myth of primordial debt does not explain how that debt to society is converted into a specific

sum of money or into a numerical accounting problem. For the state-credit theorists the answer is to be found in the archaic legal codes that specified compensation for injuries, deaths and so on. But this still does not solve the quantification problem. Graeber notes that so-called primitive currencies often fill this role—rather than to buy things, they are used to repair relations.

Graeber tries to zero in on the problem of the quantification of debts in state-credit theories. He cannot find a satisfactory explanation. It is a frustrating part of the book, and I can easily see why other commentators have skipped over it, for it takes Graeber a while to get to the point. The difficulty is also that the historical detail Graeber provides on specific injuries requiring specific sums or numbers of milk cows is just fascinating—even if it is not too far off from ordinary market logic because it is ultimately about calculating equivalences. For another thing, you can tell Graeber finds a lot more to like in state-credit theories than in barter theories, partly because of this interesting historical material. Setting aside the equivalence problem, there is also the flaw that in the ancient states taken as exemplars for state-credit theorists, only conquered peoples paid taxes. There goes the taxation part of the argument. And what is this ‘society’ to which we owe our existence, anyway? Graeber writes, ‘Imagine I am a Christian Armenian merchant living under the reign of Genghis Khan. What is “society” for me’ (66)?

One can feel the ghosts of Durkheim and Mauss stirring here, but Graeber keeps them at bay, with the help of the authors of the ancient Vedic texts (unless Mauss is speaking here as the medium of the Vedas). Rather than imagining a ‘society’ to which we owe our debts, he writes, the Vedic authors instead put forward the idea that we owe our existence to the cosmos, to those who have created the knowledge that constitute our current world, to our ancestors, and ‘to humanity as a whole’ (67). Not society, but the whole of the cosmos and humanity. And here is Graeber’s debunking of the myth of primordial debt: the myth assumes that one can calculate and pay one’s debt to sovereign and/or society. But, first, our debts are much greater than any mathematical problem, and, second, even if we could calculate the incalculable, it is not at all clear to whom we would repay it. How do you write a cheque to the universe?

For Graeber, the political unpalatability of state-credit theories is more problematic than their analytical or historical implausibility. Ultimately they hold up the state as the inheritor of the obligations owed to ‘society’. If the myth of barter provides flimsy undergirding for the market, the myth of primordial debt does the same for the state.<sup>6</sup>

### **Moral Modalities and the Enslavement of Women**

Yet the world we live in is profoundly shaped—constituted even—by barter and state-credit theories. Graeber readily admits this. Our lives are ruled by myths. But those myths do not get us any closer to understanding the initial moral dilemma: why a monetary debt must be repaid even if it means the deaths of thousands.



Moving beyond the myths, then, Graeber outlines three modalities of morality, three broad moral principles on which he thinks all economic behaviour and relationships rest. One of the punch lines is that all three co-exist, in people's everyday lives, yet we rarely take note of this fact. Graeber at times seems to suggest that they have always done so, but at times comes close to slotting them into an evolutionary and/or cartographic frame ('once upon a time', or 'over there, far away'). He labels these moral principles communism, hierarchy, and exchange.

Communism is the moral relation in which 'no accounts are taken' (99). What Graeber means is not state socialism with its plethora of documents and record keeping, but a more mundane communism. When I ask you to please pass the salt (one of Graeber's examples), you do not expect any compensation in return. There is no quantification—I will give you two dollars if you pass me the salt—nor is there reciprocity—if you give me the salt, I will give you the pepper. There is therefore, for Graeber, no debt. Hierarchy is the moral relation where we recognise relationships of rank between people, that there are different sorts of people (111). This difference in rank or kind is based not in any real difference but in precedent or custom, repeated acts of deference done over and over again. The relation is between unequals, and there is no way I could repay my superior for some act or good bestowed upon me.<sup>7</sup> Again, no quantification, no reciprocity, no debt as Graeber defines it.

The remaining modality is exchange. 'Exchange is all about equivalence' (103). The equivalence of people and the equivalence of things, words, deeds—potentially anything. Both commercial exchange and Mauss's gift exchange fit under this modality. And from that equivalence derives debt. Equivalence implies that there is always a way to make up for a good, a deed, a word dealt out to you: you can always pay it back somehow, by finding something equal to it. During the time the debt goes unpaid, hierarchy rules (121). Unpayable debts are unbearable precisely for this reason: they place us in a state of suspended animation in a relation of hierarchy which we cannot escape unless and until we repay.

The point of specifying these three distinct moral modalities or principles is to argue that not all human interactions take the form of exchange (122). Exchange, as Graeber defines it, is specific to instances where there can be equivalence and, crucially, where there can be separation: having repaid my debt to you, the debt—and our relationship—is cancelled. I can walk away.

Now we are really getting to the heart of the thing. If we are given to a world where we owe incalculable debts to the cosmos and all of humanity, how do we come to a moment of exchange where we and everything else—goods, words—are separate and separable, where we can render equivalences, settle a debt, and again part, left alone and individual once more?

In the two central chapters, titled, 'Games with Sex and Death' and 'Honor and Degradation, or, On the Foundations of Contemporary Civilization', Graeber brings it all together and sets out his own *ab origine* origin story for debt, which then gets muddled with a historical origin theory, and a story about why today we feel ethically compelled to repay debts even if the consequence is patently unethical.

It is helpful to recall that one of Graeber's problems with state-credit theories of money is that the state assumes the role of 'society'. First, 'society' as such does not exist, and second, even if it did, the state would hereby be usurping its position as that to which we owe everything. But we do not. We are Buddhists or Hindus or something, owing our debt to the cosmos and all of humanity (I am being facetious, of course, but, well, you cannot go around citing the Vedas and referencing 'the Brahmanas' (67) and think you are not going to be teased for it), and what is more, we are anarchists. We should be able to determine our destinies and our debts and how we repay them. Instead, we have this state and money thing, and the state and money only can take on the role that they do under conditions of extreme violence.

The delicate line Graeber has to draw is between on the one hand his own ethical argument for cosmic, unquantifiable obligation and a world of 'human economies' in the beginning, without states; and on the other, the histories he skirts over for us, covering, well, 5 000 years of human history. Stuff did happen. State-credit theories and barter-commodity theories did, alternately and often cyclically, as Graeber demonstrates in the second half of the book, rise to prominence, capturing the imagination of noble and patriarch, king and parliament, authors and activists alike. In so doing, they conjured a world after their own image. The theories properly speaking do not describe, they perform (see, perhaps, Callon 1998). But that performing makes difficult the quest for origins with which Graeber begins his analysis: the origins of the ethical imperative to repay a debt.

And origins are what we get in droves in these two central chapters. The fundamental requirements for the kind of exchange that can linger, unfulfilled, generating a debt that must be repaid where repayment is a calculable sum are two: equivalence, and separation (Graeber avoids the term alienation). Equivalence in fact comes about *through* separation, through the parting of a thing or person from its contexts. Graeber contrasts commercial economies to what he calls (following Hart 2000) 'human economies'. In human economies, 'social currencies' help create and reorganise social relationships. Human economies are rich with context. Webs of relationships matter; indeed, they are the only thing that does matter.

How do human economies give way to commercial economies? Violence. Slavery. Patriarchy. This is where the book gets really weird.

Violence tears away contexts. Slavery is the modal form of such violence, for slavery sunders people from relationships, rendering them all equal to one another in that they stand on nothing but their own two feet. In a rhetorically powerful rebuttal to liberal political theory, Graeber argues that its very presumptions of free and equal persons rest in the sundering of ties represented by enslavement. Whereas 'in a human economy, each person is unique' (158), in a commodity economy, a person is turned into 'a generic value capable of being added and subtracted and used as a means to measure debt' (159). This generic value is presumably their labour power in a specific set of historical relations (though it is not clear that Graeber is actually making this point). 'Ripped from their contexts' (162), people and things stand only

for themselves, and everyone/everything is equal insofar as it stands alone. Contexts shorn away, people and things can then enter into commercial equations. Mathematics can be applied to anything. People 'begin to use the same money used to measure dignity to buy eggs and haircuts' (176).

Whence this originary violence, the first moment of enslavement? Graeber embarks in the characteristic global and historical peregrinations we should be accustomed to at this point in the book, but circles around toward ancient Mesopotamia and the 'origins of patriarchy' (176). And what we get is a recounting of a transformation in bride wealth, in which matrimonial exchanges model themselves on slave markets, and 'marriage came more and more to resemble a simple cash transaction' (180).

It all happens very quickly in the book, but Graeber argues that sometime between 1400 and 1000 BC, what Engels referred to as the world historic defeat of the female sex actually took place, and sexuality gradually began its descent—over the millennia—into associations 'with degradation, corruption, and guilt' (185).

To recapitulate: The myth of barter and the myth of primordial debts leave us with only the market or the state to understand the condition of humanity. Markets and states depend on each other, parasitically so, perhaps, but they are inextricably bound, and that bond limits our imagination of alternatives. Alternatives actually abound, meanwhile, in the small acts of passing the salt and in the ethnographic record. We have a hard time seeing them because we are enthralled to a logic of calculability that tries to turn all alternatives into equations of exchange. This is only possible because the violent separation of people and things from their contexts. The originary moment of such violence, repeated throughout the ages, is slavery, or patriarchy, or both.

Thenceforth, and this is the second half of the book (which I will not review in detail here because I think the real action is in the first half)—all of human history represents a cycling through periods where money as commodity holds sway, and money as credit holds sway. The former is associated with wrenching periods of war; the latter with the relative peace imposed by (violent) states/markets. In both phases, debt as an equivalence calculation between persons/things sundered from their relations is the dominant mode of economy. Those alternatives continue to exist, off to the side, among ethnographic others and in our everyday non-quantifiabilities. We need to see them, recuperate them, imagine a future with them, not about calculation, debt, state and market, but about our own truly human economies.

### **Odd and Curious: Magic Squares, Unequal Bride Wealth, Wonder Cabinets**

As is hopefully evident by now, I deeply admire this book and am deeply sceptical of it at the same time. Reading it is like a visit to a really excellent museum—the British Museum, let's say—where practically every historical period, every people, every technology and record of human creativity rests next to all the others, impossibly close to one another but helpfully illuminated with pithy and informative interpretative

placards. I love the British Museum. But I also recognise that it is precisely such places that provide the target of equally tender mockery for the Museum of Jurassic Technology and other installations that seek to query the encyclopaedic architectures of scholarly inquiry. Located in Culver City, California, in the heart of Los Angeles, the Museum of Jurassic Technology presents itself as the ‘straight man’ in the comedy of modern knowledge. Entering it for the first time, visitors experience the familiar layout, displays, and placards of any other natural history museum. Yet the place is a wonder cabinet (see Weschler 1995). Its Wikipedia entry drolly states, ‘the Museum holds a specialized repository of relics and artifacts evoking some of the more obscure and poetic aspects of natural history, the history of technology and science, and their entwined realizations in human artistry and ingenuity’ ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum\\_of\\_Jurassic\\_Technology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum_of_Jurassic_Technology)). I do not want to say much more. One has to experience it for oneself.<sup>8</sup>

I bring it up, however, because I just wish Graeber had entered the cabinet of wonder he created in this book. The profusion of possibilities he would have encountered might have belied his quest for origins. It would allow new myths, too, ones without any origins at all.

In 1980, Michelle Rosaldo noted that few social scientists in the twentieth century felt ‘called upon ... to begin their tales “at the beginning”’, with origin stories, in contrast to the bookcase full of nineteenth century texts—she cited Spencer, Maine, Durkheim, Engels, and Freud, and we could add Darwin, Bachofen, Morgan, Lubbock, Tylor. The one exception, she wrote, was in feminist scholarship. There, authors as diverse as Simone de Beauvoir and Adrienne Rich turned to the anthropological record to try to answer the question, ‘When did “it”—women’s subordination—‘start’ (Rosaldo 1980, 391)?

For Rosaldo, however, anthropology enlisted in the quest for origins was ‘an anthropology limited by the assumptions with which it first began and so unable to transcend the biases its questions presuppose’ (392). As she wrote:

Quests for origins sustain (since they are predicated upon) a discourse cast in universal terms; and universalism permits us all too quickly to assume—for everyone but ourselves perhaps—the *sociological* significance of what individual people *do* or, even worse, of what, in biological terms, they are. Stated otherwise, our search for origins reveals a faith in ultimate and essential truths. (393)

Rosaldo went on to deconstruct the Victorian assumptions of 1970s quests for origins. Seeking to move feminism beyond simply a focus on women and women’s status—for after all, ‘men and women ultimately live together in the world’ (396)—Rosaldo criticised the dichotomous terms presupposed whenever woman is assumed to be opposed to man, domestic to public, nature to culture. I would add, human to commercial, incalculable to quantifiable.

For it seems to me that Graeber, in differentiating human from commercial economies, and the non-quantifiable from the calculable, has precisely reproduced the very nineteenth-century dichotomies that Rosaldo sought to dislodge. (She was just about

as successful in her effort as Margaret Mead, per my remarks above.) In doing so, he has denied his own insight that these things co-occur and come along, coming into and out of phase not only in grand historical periods, but in the shorter-term temporality of the everyday. Pass the salt.

The next problem, anticipated by Rosaldo, is that Graeber's 'alliance with the dualisms of the past' teaches that debt, money, economy 'must be understood not in terms of relationship ... but of difference and apartness' (Rosaldo 1980, 409). For is it not the point also of Graeber's argument that alternatives are all around us *and* are always in complex relation with each other and the supposedly dominant moral qua economic modality? Instead of asking, 'how did it all begin?', which draws us back toward Victorian dichotomies, we need a subtle account of the significance of the fact that the 'we' who create debts are ourselves social, relational creations (paraphrasing Rosaldo 1980, 416). The point is those relations. But it is hard to think about us all, together, in relations with each other and things and the planet and cosmos, without positing a first cause, a moment, an originary violence of separation that leads to my individual consciousness or whatever, because our conceptual apparatus demands that separation for us even to begin to speak. Perhaps Graeber's Brahmanas were on to something.

Being open to this sort of thinking might blow our minds even further. In addition to communism, exchange and hierarchy, how about adding in Jane Collier's (1988) bride service, equal bride wealth and unequal bride wealth? These are ideal typic models based on ethnographic and historical data that Collier used to imagine not origin points but systems of relationships. They cannot neatly be absorbed into Graeber's tripartite scheme. In fact, Graeber's modalities or principles of morality are at right angles to Collier's ideal types. Graeber wants to start with principles in order to understand the relations they produce. For Collier, this structuralist presupposition is backwards. Collier starts instead with the distribution of rewards—who has got what, at a given moment in time—in order to understand how those with the goods gain prestige by claiming that it was their closeness to valued principles that got them where they are.

Similarly with number. Graeber's argument hinges on calculability based on violent separation of people and things from their contexts. But the mathematics here is basically algebra, which propels an analytical operation of getting to the bottom of a mystery, an unknown (solve for  $x$ ). This is only one genre of mathematics (and mystery writing!), a sort of quantitative whodunit (see Maurer 2005, 120). There are also magic squares, nonreferential numbers that do not count things at all. And there are different ways of counting, different scales not limited to the ratio scale of Aristotle's proportionality in his version of the barter myth:

[A]ll things that are exchanged must be somehow comparable. It is for this end that money has been introduced, and it becomes in a sense an intermediate; for it measures all things, and therefore the excess and the defect—how many shoes are equal to a house or to a given amount of food. The number of shoes exchanged for a house (or for a given amount of food) must therefore correspond to the ratio of builder to shoemaker. For if this be not so, there will be no exchange and

no intercourse. And this proportion will not be effected unless the goods are somehow equal. (Aristotle, Book V, 5)

It is a difficult thing to get one's head around if one is not a mathematician (or has never been forced to teach statistics), but Aristotle and Graeber's equivalence function demands a ratio scale, a level of measurement with an absolute zero, a nothing. This is how debts can be cancelled with a payment, after all. There are other ways to count, other kinds of measure. An interval scale presumes equality between each unit of measurement but an arbitrary, not absolute, zero point, one that does not signify nothing. The Celsius scale is a good example. It has a historical origin, to be sure, which includes the reasons why Mr Celsius chose an arbitrary point on the scale—the freezing point of water—for the zero point. If it is two degrees Celsius outside and the temperature goes down by two degrees, it is zero degrees Celsius—not an absence of temperature, not a cancelling out of heat.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle himself moderated his own pronouncement on proportionality. He did so in an argument against the hard and fast rule of universals and origins, the sovereign origin of law. Sometimes, strict proportions and the letter of the law lead to greater injustice. This animated the tradition of equity in the common law (equity—not equality):

When the law speaks universally ... and a case arises on it which is not covered by the universal statement, then it is right, where the legislator fails us and has erred by oversimplicity, to correct the omission ... Hence the equitable is just, and better than one kind of justice—not better than absolute justice but better than the error that arises from the absoluteness of the statement. And this is the nature of the equitable, a correction of law where it is defective owing to its universality. (Aristotle, Book V, 10)

Here, Aristotle introduced the 'leaden' or 'Lesbian' rule: a flexible measure, not really quantifiable in ratio scale terms but not non-quantifiable either. It helps when you're



**Figure 2.** Fragment of a sarcophagus, with unfinished Lesbian cymatium moulding on upper left. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

making the kind of moulding in Figure 2. Pliable, like the soft base metal the alchemists often used in their assays to create gold but whose poisonous nature probably made them just a little bit crazy.

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Numismatists refer to the 'social currencies' of the ethnographic canon under the category, 'Odd and Curious'. Graeber relishes in describing for his readers the way these social currencies forge and reforge relations. He may not always cite the contributions of the full community of scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of alternative economies, social currencies, and ethnographic possibilities.<sup>10</sup> He does not necessarily acknowledge his own debts, in other words. And he does not always fully embrace—or give himself over to—the more profound lessons in that ethnographic canon.

One of the reasons *Debt* is so enjoyable to read, if also enervating, is because of the Wunderkammer quality of the book. Yet Graeber, separate from his book, wants to resolve it into a quest for origins, for real—not for ironic effect or amusement. You almost feel like the book and the author are struggling with each other. The book is a wonder cabinet. The author wants, and does not want, to be more programmatic. Graeber hedges against vanguardism that can so easily be co-opted into a state or state-like form. Yet, he does want to change the world, decisively, now, and thinks history can be our guide to the potential of the past and anthropology to the possibilities of the present. He wants us to make and keep promises not 'corrupted by both math and violence' (391). '[N]o one has the right to tell us our true value, no one has the right to tell us what we truly owe' (*ibid.*). I am with Graeber on this. I am also with him when he proclaims the 'endless variety of forms' of exchange, hierarchy, and communism (386). I do not think he would have any difficulty at all in absorbing my critical comments into his framework, however. And that is the problem, and why he is spot on when he, like Rosaldo, says we need so desperately to find ways of asking new questions.

## Notes

- [1] I would like to thank Tom Boellstorff, Julia Elyachar, Taylor Nelms, Beth Reddy, Janet Roitman and Nick Seaver for their comments, criticisms and suggestions on earlier drafts of this review. I would also like to thank Greg Acciaioli for inviting me to write it, and Chris Hann for a letter that arrived just in time to spur me on. All errors and inconsistencies remain my responsibility alone.
- [2] Which he sort of is, and which I sort of am too, but which I think leaves a crucial aspect of his argument by the wayside, as I suggest below.
- [3] And its remarkable reach. From Twitter: 'now I've seen it all – Graeber's "Debt5K" as a door prize being given away by M&G's fixed income fund managers!' (Reproduced in an email to author from Scott Mainwaring, via Ken Anderson). I received this email on the same day that it was announced that Graeber's book had won the Society for Cultural Anthropology's Bateson Prize (9 July 2012). M&G Investments is one of the largest investment management firms in the United Kingdom.

- [4] I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers and to Greg Acciaoli for pressing me to clarify this point.
- [5] Below, I begin to abbreviate this as ‘state-credit theories’; though there are differences between state theorists and credit theorists of money there is also considerable overlap, and I see no reason for greater specificity in the context of this review.
- [6] One can of course have a credit theory of money without affording such a role to the state, e.g., Foley 1986.
- [7] Please ignore for the moment the numerous examples in the ethnographic record where low-ranking people do repay debts to higher-ranking people. To pick one example almost at random, see Barton 1919.
- [8] On 8 July 2012, the date I last accessed the Wikipedia entry, a rather humourless note from Wikipedia’s editors stated: ‘This article’s *tone or style may not reflect the encyclopaedic tone used on Wikipedia*. See Wikipedia’s guide to writing better articles for suggestions. (September 2011)’ (original emphasis). Either the irony of the entry was lost on them, or, in a brilliant double ironic move, a devotee of the Museum of Jurassic Technology saw fit to post this comment.
- [9] There are lots more ways of doing numbers, too. One can cite the ethnographic record (e.g., Mimica 1988) but also reflect further on Western scales and levels of measurement (Guyer 2004). Or even the two together (Verran 2001).
- [10] See Hann’s (2012) very generous review and gentle critique in this regard.

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