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David Graeber on Bureaucracy

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Good Morning!
I thank you very much for your presence!

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Working Premise

All texts are at disposal.

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Design pages and simple pages

- Pages of the PowerPoint endowed with design refer to quotations.
- Pages of the PowerPoint without design are my notes.

Introduction

In my contribution I would like to highlight some aspects of David Graeber's (1961-2020) interpretations of bureaucracy.

Graeber's book on which I am going to base my notes is: "The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy (Brooklyn, New York, 2015)".

Graeber contends in his book that there are actually several types of criticism of bureaucracy.

Different types of criticism of the bureaucracy are carried out depending on whether the criticism of the bureaucracy comes from the left or the right political spectrum is exercised.

Graeber has used two different terms of bureaucracy:

Bureaucracy attacked by the right-wing parties

- A concept of bureaucracy is represented by the type of bureaucracy which underlies the organization of the welfare state. This kind of bureaucracy is attacked by the right-wing parties as an economically and socially unhealthy and unnatural system of rules in comparison with the market system, which is natural and healthy.

Bureaucracy is in this context the complex of public offices, which in the opinion of the right parties limits the economic deregulation.

This type of bureaucracy is understood within the right-wing political spectrum as an obstacle to the free development of the individual and private initiative.

Graeber's attack on bureaucracy

Another term of bureaucracy is that which supports the neoliberal market order.

This kind of bureaucracy is attacked by the radical left.

This kind of bureaucracy promotes a neoliberal economic policy and is functional to the promotion of the neoliberal economic policy: its representatives are the IMF, the World Bank, and similar institutions.

Uncovering the market

An aspect closely related to the topic just described, which Graeber illustrated several times in the course of his reflections, consists in unmasking the power structure of the market and the free market economy.

Market is – contrary to the opinion of its supporters - not a natural structure and corresponds to no natural order that is perfect in itself.

Market is something artificial: it is a product of specific interests, intentions and goals.

Markets require a determined power structure: they need specific bureaucratic structures that protect, enforce and promote them.

Criticisms on bureaucracy

Graeber mentions at least two forms of criticism in his study:

- On the one hand, he claims that the criticism of bureaucracy is an issue of the right-wing political spectrum, since the right parties has used the theme to represent the ideology of the free individual, of individualism and free initiative against the state.
- On the other hand, he explains that the criticism of the bureaucracy can also belong to the left-wing political spectrum. It serves to unmask the mythology of the market economy.

Graeber and bureaucracy

Usually it is said that free market economy brings an expansion of freedom individual and a reduction in the state.

Actually, market economy means a reorientation and a subjugation of the entire state in favor of the enforcement of the interests of certain parts of society.

What is innovative about Graeber's ideas is that the theme is criticism of bureaucracy is a topic for the left spectrum.

Criticism of bureaucracy is commonly associated with the right-wing spectrum, which in the name of deregulation and freedom initiative polemises against the limits placed on the individual by the bureaucracy.

Graeber and bureaucracy

Graeber shows that a certain type of bureaucracy is essential for the market economy.

The criticism of this type of bureaucracy, which in itself forms a gigantic apparatus promoting and protecting the interests of certain powers, should be a topic of the left parties.

The supporters of the free market act as if market wouldn't need any bureaucracy.

Actually, the market needs a bureaucratic order that must serve certain goals.

Market is always a product of certain interests to the detriment of other interests.

Notes

Graeber describes how the fight against bureaucracy started in American politics in the 1960s.

The political figure of George Wallace is in this regard particularly important:

Graeber on Wallace

Still, right-wing populists soon realized that, whatever the realities, making a target of bureaucrats was almost always effective. Hence, in their public pronouncements, the condemnation of what U.S. governor George Wallace, in his 1968 campaign for President, first labeled “pointy-headed bureaucrats” living off hardworking citizens’ taxes, was unrelenting. Wallace is actually a crucial figure here. Nowadays, Americans mainly remember him as a failed reactionary, or even a snarling lunatic: the last die-hard Southern segregationist standing with an axe outside a public school door. But in terms of his broader legacy, he could just as well be represented as a kind of political genius. He was, after all, the first politician to create a national platform for a kind of right-wing populism that was soon to prove so infectious that by now, a generation later, it has come to be adopted by pretty much everyone, across the political spectrum.

Graeber on Wallace

As a result, amongst working-class Americans, government is now generally seen as being made up of two sorts of people: “politicians,” who are blustering crooks and liars but can at least occasionally be voted out of office, and “bureaucrats,” who are condescending elitists almost impossible to uproot. There is assumed to be a kind of tacit alliance between what came to be seen as the parasitical poor (in America usually pictured in overtly racist terms) and the equally parasitical self-righteous officials whose existence depends on subsidizing the poor using other people’s money.

Notes

In his observations on the origins of right-wing parties, Graeber draws on some of Wallace's views as part of his work during the election campaign:

- Wallace constructed an opposition between citizens, who really worked, and bureaucrats who, on the other hand, were useless.
- Likewise, he opposed the positivity of the private sector to the negativity of the public sector.

The attack on bureaucracy turns out to be an attack on the whole public sector for the benefit of private sector. It is also an attack on the welfare state itself.

The attack on bureaucracy also forms the first and fundamental step for further attacks on the entire social security.

Notes

Since Wallace this kind of strategy has always had great success in the right-wing political spectrum.

According to Graeber, at least part of American society is convinced that the government is made up bureaucrats who are completely useless.

The right-wing parties attack the form of bureaucracy and bureaucratic regulations that stand in the way of deregulation of the economy; the complex of bureaucratic regulations that are attacked by the right-wing parties correspond to those norms that guarantee social security.

Notes

Another interesting analysis by Graeber is in this regard the following:

Graeber on bureaucracy and market

In contemporary American populism—and increasingly, in the rest of the world as well— there can be only one alternative to “bureaucracy,” and that is “the market.” Sometimes this is held to mean that government should be run more like a business. Sometimes it is held to mean we should simply get the bureaucrats out of the way and let nature take its course, which means letting people attend to the business of their lives untrammelled by endless rules and regulations imposed on them from above, and so allowing the magic of the marketplace to provide its own solutions.



Graeber on bureaucracy and market

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



Notes

Market versus bureaucracy is the slogan of certain parties.

According to this view, any form of bureaucracy must be eliminated.

Regulations and rules would have to be removed.

The market order corresponds to a natural state that is threatened by regulations.

A market without regulations, on the other hand, could solve all problems.

Democracy is equated with market.

Finance and corporations

The dominance of finance on corporations represents another pillar of neoliberal economic policy:

Finance over industries

What began to happen in the seventies, and paved the way for what we see today, was a kind of strategic pivot of the upper echelons of U.S. corporate bureaucracy—away from the workers, and towards shareholders, and eventually, towards the financial structure as a whole. The mergers and acquisitions, corporate raiding, junk bonds, and asset stripping that began under Reagan and Thatcher and culminated in the rise of private equity firms were merely some of the more dramatic early mechanisms through which this shift of allegiance worked itself out. In fact, there was a double movement: corporate management became more financialized, but at the same time, the financial sector became corporatized, with investment banks, hedge funds, and the like largely replacing individual investors. As a result the investor class and the executive class became almost indistinguishable.

Notes

The financialization of the economy serves exclusively the interests of investors.

Corporate forces have only had to promote the interests of the shareholders.

Therefore, cost cuts are the constant order at the upper floors of companies.

As a result, there is an ever-increasing caesura between the upper and lower levels of the company.

Differences between right and left

The right parties undoubtedly had a powerful weapon in attacking the bureaucracy.

The Left, on the other hand, has remained disorientated in its programs. The Left has not been able to think alternatively to the right.

The traditional parties of the left have simply adopted the ideas of the rights adopted with some corrections.

The left has renounced the development of its own thinking:

Graeber on the failures of the Left

As the language of antibureaucratic individualism has been adopted, with increasing ferocity, by the Right, which insists on “market solutions” to every social problem, the mainstream Left has increasingly reduced itself to fighting a kind of pathetic rearguard action, trying to salvage remnants of the old welfare state: it has acquiesced with—often even spearheaded —attempts to make government efforts more “efficient” through the partial privatization of services and the incorporation of ever-more “market principles,” “market incentives,” and market-based “accountability processes” into the structure of the bureaucracy itself.

Graeber on the failures of the Left

The result is a political catastrophe. There's really no other way to put it. What is presented as the "moderate" Left solution to any social problems—and radical left solutions are, almost everywhere now, ruled out tout court—has invariably come to be some nightmare fusion of the worst elements of bureaucracy and the worst elements of capitalism. It's as if someone had consciously tried to create the least appealing possible political position. It is a testimony to the genuine lingering power of leftist ideals that anyone would even consider voting for a party that promoted this sort of thing—because surely, if they do, it's not because they actually think these are good policies, but because these are the only policies anyone who identifies themselves as left-of-center is allowed to set forth.

Is there any wonder, then, that every time there is a social crisis, it is the Right, rather than the Left, which becomes the venue for the expression of popular anger?

Graeber on the mistakes of the Left

Graeber illustrates the fundamental problem and the fundamental error of the left. The left basically has adopted the economic solutions of the right.

The Left has not been able to think out an authentic alternative to the right-wing thought. At most it only makes small corrections to the thought of the right.

The right has chosen the term 'market' as a command word. The Left has accepted the market as the only and absolute economic principle, whereby the severity of the market laws is reduced by some elements that have been added to the market principles.

The left has consequently pursued a kind of 'medical-therapeutic' economic policy, which should have repaired the damage caused by market principles people.

Graeber on the mistakes of the Left

The market remains within the perspective of the moderate left an undisputed and undeniable institution.

The politicians of the moderate left have also allowed that certain social services were privatized and that market principles were applied to areas of social security.

This course of action means the disappearance of most social security.

As a political result, the traditional left parties had to suffer devastating defeats everywhere and not accidentally.

The left has become completely subaltern to the principles of the right.

The political spectrum now consists of a right-wing component, which acts as a promoter of the limitless market system, compared to a left-wing component that is nothing else than a kind of 'hospital' for those who fail in the market.

Notes

It is no coincidence that the traditional left has no criticism of bureaucracy.

The opposite would be surprising. The traditional left has adopted neoliberal policies.

Graeber comments on the lack of conception of the moderate left:

Graeber on the mistakes of the Left

The “acceptable” Left has, as I say, embraced bureaucracy and the market simultaneously. The libertarian Right at least has a critique of bureaucracy. The fascist Right has a critique of the market—generally, they are supporters of social welfare policies; they just want to restrict them to members of their own favored ethnic group.

Notes

Furthermore, the strategy of the moderate left can be achieved by removing it characterized by the unions:

Left against Unions

No political revolution can succeed without allies, and bringing along a certain portion of the middle class—and, even more crucially, convincing the bulk of the middle classes that they had some kind of stake in finance-driven capitalism—was critical. Ultimately, the more liberal members of this professional- managerial elite became the social base for what came to pass as “left-wing” political parties, as actual working-class organizations like trade unions were cast into the wilderness. (Hence, the U.S. Democratic Party, or New Labour in Great Britain, whose leaders engage in regular ritual acts of public abjuration of the very unions that have historically formed their strongest base of support). These were of course people who already tended to work in thoroughly bureaucratized environments, whether schools, hospitals, or corporate law firms. The actual working class, who bore a traditional loathing for such characters, either dropped out of politics entirely, or were increasingly reduced to casting protest votes for the radical Right.

Notes

Particularly interesting in this context is Graeber's description of the way in which the traditional left parties are moving away from the unions and are turning to investors.

The left-wing traditional parties have accepted a neoliberal economic policy.

Consequently, they have increasingly distanced themselves from the unions because the trade unions remained the only political force that contradicted neoliberal politics.

Markets on bureaucracy

The market order also needs bureaucracy.

Market does not mean reduction of the state and of the bureaucracy. The enforcement and maintaining of the market order need one extremely complex bureaucracy:

Market and regulations

This apparent paradox—that government policies intending to reduce government interference in the economy actually end up producing more regulations, more bureaucrats, and more police—can be observed so regularly that I think we are justified in treating it as a general sociological law. I propose to call it “the iron law of liberalism”:

The Iron Law of Liberalism states that any market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs.

Notes

Graeber's formulation of the iron law of liberalism is significant: on closer inspection, reforms that promote the market turn out to involve a multiplication of regulations and bureaucratic apparatus.

Notes

These bureaucratic structures serve precisely to enforce market reforms and above all to annul the opponents who oppose these reforms.

Graeber's argument shows that the implementation of the neoliberal politics is always accompanied by the presence of an apparatus of power. The availability of power is an indispensable requisite for the implementation of this policy:

On the growth of bureaucracy

While the idea that the market is somehow opposed to and independent of government has been used at least at least since the nineteenth century to justify laissez faire economic policies designed to lessen the role of government, they never actually have that effect. English liberalism, for instance, did not lead to a reduction of state bureaucracy, but the exact opposite: an endlessly ballooning array of legal clerks, registrars, inspectors, notaries, and police officials who made the liberal dream of a world of free contract between autonomous individuals possible. It turned out that maintaining a free market economy required a thousand times more paperwork than a Louis XIV-style absolutist monarchy.



Notes

No market can actually exist without bureaucracy: Graeber's unmasking process aims at showing that the market economy does not diminish the dimension of the state apparatus.

Rather, it means a reorientation of the structure of the state itself in favor of the organization the market economy.

Both views that the market economy limits the state and that the market economy needs at most a small bureaucracy turn out to be wrong, because the market economy actually depends on state protection.

Within the market economy there is no restriction of the state, but rather a reorientation of the state and the state apparatus which are used as instruments to enforce neoliberal policies.

Notes

For Graeber, the opposition between market and state is wrong: the market needs certain state institutions like the bureaucracy. Administrative officers, archivists, inspectors, notaries and police officers become the creation, enforcement and maintenance of the market.

In addition, a forceful apparatus is needed to ensure compliance with the laws of the market:

Additions to the Iron Law of Liberalism



Here I think it is possible to add a kind of corollary to the Iron Law of Liberalism. History reveals that political policies that favor “the market” have always meant even more people in offices to administer things, but it also reveals that they also mean an increase of the range and density of social relations that are ultimately regulated by the threat of violence. This obviously flies in the face of everything we’ve been taught to believe about the market, but if you observe what actually happens, it’s clearly true. In a sense, even calling this a “corollary” is deceptive, because we’re really just talking about two different ways of talking about the same thing. The bureaucratization of daily life means the imposition of impersonal rules and regulations; impersonal rule and regulations, in turn, can only operate if they are backed up by the threat of force.

Additions to the Iron Law of Liberalism

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And indeed, in this most recent phase of total bureaucratization, we've seen security cameras, police scooters, issuers of temporary ID cards, and men and women in a variety of uniforms acting in either public or private capacities, trained in tactics of menacing, intimidating, and ultimately deploying physical violence, appear just about everywhere—even in places such as playgrounds, primary schools, college campuses, hospitals, libraries, parks, or beach resorts, where fifty years ago their presence would have been considered scandalous, or simply weird.

Notes

Anyone who does not accept the market reform but rejects it will be fought against. Market reforms imply violence or at least a willingness to use violence against all those who publicly protest against the market reforms.

Market reforms require a powerful apparatus that uses force against all those who oppose these market reforms.

The apparatus of violence also serves to separate the members of the bureaucracy from the people.

A separate class is created which has the task of imposing certain regulations on individual states. This means that the free space of democracy is progressively narrowed and restricted. Graeber mentions some examples of the bureaucratic organizations, which are intended to promote the basic market order and in the past decades actually promoted:

Graeber on the Elites

At the top were the trade bureaucracies like the IMF, World Bank, WTO and the G8s, along with treaty organizations like NAFTA or the EU. These actually developed the economic—and even social—policies followed by supposedly democratic governments in the global south. Just below were the large global financial firms like Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, American Insurance Group, or, for that matter, institutions like Standard & Poors.



Graeber on the Elites

Below that came the transnational mega-corporations. (Much of what was being called “international trade” in fact consisted merely of the transfer of materials back and forth between different branches of the same corporation.) Finally, one has to include the NGOs, which in many parts of the world come to provide many of the social services previously provided by government, with the result that urban planning in a city in Nepal, or health policy in a town in Nigeria, might well have been developed in offices in Zurich or Chicago.



Notes

Graeber describes the organizations that are withdrawn from society. He mentions the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, the G8 states, NAFTA and the EU. The committees of these organizations develop the regulations which are then dictated to the individual states. These regulations are set by financial groups and organizations such as Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, American Insurance Group or Standard & Poors.

It is in this context interesting that Graeber also points out the role of NGOs. These organisations take on certain functions and tasks that were previously specific duty of the state.

Notes

It is no coincidence that tasks have been taken over by private organisations.

The state creates a situation in which social services are no longer provided by the state, but are supplied by private organizations.

Former duties of the state to provide certain forms of social security are transferred to private organizations, which, however, in themselves have no actual obligation to offer these services.

Restrictions for the citizens

The rights of citizens are being increasingly restricted and conceptually transformed into needs.

On closer inspection, Graeber's criticism turns out to be more than just a criticism at the bureaucracy.

A kind of technocracy under the mask of technical knowledge has completely disempowered or at least weakened in a decisive way the governments, parliaments and all state institutions.

Notes

Governments and parliaments, regardless of which political orientation they have, must comply with and implement certain regulations that have been decided by organizations that are not democratic have legitimacy.

Democracy thus becomes an empty name.

Graeber's observations turn out to be a criticism of the progressive erosion of democracy through the regulations of certain supranational bureaucratic organizations. Graeber shows that numerous decisions which determine the policy are made by committees that are outside of democratic control.

The authentic aspect of globalisation

What's more, its exponents endlessly insisted that despite protestations to the contrary, what the media was calling "globalization" had almost nothing to do with the effacement of borders and the free movement of people, products, and ideas. It was really about trapping increasingly large parts of the world's population behind highly militarized national borders within which social protections could be systematically withdrawn, creating a pool of laborers so desperate that they would be willing to work for almost nothing.

Notes

Globalization is actually not what its proponents propagate. Graeber points out that globalization begins with the abolition of borders and with the free movement of people, goods and ideas.

Globalisation as a historical phenomenon means dismantling social security and social dumping, so that workers can be forced to accept work and the lowest possible wage.

Notes

Graeber's investigations into the market and bureaucracy present themselves as the unmasking of the entire market system. The following are key points:

- The market is an artificial system.
- The bureaucracy is not a neutral institution, but it is functional to certain interests. Therefore, there is also a corresponding bureaucracy in the neoliberal system which is built to serve the interests of the market.
- The market would not be able to assert itself without an apparatus of power and violence.

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