

03 David Graeber, Anthropologist and Anarchist

What connects David Graeber, anthropologist and anarchist, Sangharakshita, founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community, bodhisattvas, and pirates?

The answer is play.

Let me explain.

Like all children, as a boy I lived and played with friends in many imaginary worlds. One of my favourites was the world of pirates.

Inspired by Captain Hook in the story of Peter Pan, and by Long John Silver of Treasure Island, we had fun, playing out sea battles, and the search for hidden treasure. If I was a boy now, I'd be playing at being Captain Jack Sparrow of The Pirates of the Caribbean.

But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pirates were real. They operated around the Caribbean and later in the Indian ocean, using Madagascar as an island base.

Stories of pirates were very popular at that time, mixing fiction and fact.

It's into this mixed storied world of pirates that David Graeber enters with a recently published book.

After his sudden death three years ago, two books written by David Graeber have been published; the first, "The Dawn of Everything", co-written with David Wengrow, rewrote the usual account of human history; the second, much shorter book, was entitled "Pirate Enlightenment or the Real Libertalia".

Both books raise questions about the possible ways that humans can live together, highlighting alternative forms of society; forms in which David Graeber was interested both as an anthropologist and as an anarchist.

Graeber's second, shorter, book begins around 1690, with the first arrival of European pirates from the Caribbean on the island of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.

Stories told in Britain and America in the eighteenth century spoke of a colony known as "Libertalia", founded by pirates on the north-east coast of Madagascar in the early 18th century.

Why does Graeber use the words "Pirate Enlightenment"?

Not because they were enlightened in the Buddhist sense, but because in the stories the pirates created an ideal society seemingly inspired by the spirit of the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Graeber describes how pirates were concerned about cultivating an outward image of ruthless violence, while seeking to resolve their internal affairs by collective deliberation.

It was claimed that on board the pirate ship, it was only during battle that a pirate captain was able to give orders. At other times actions could only be undertaken by universal consent.

Graeber conjectures that this spirit of egalitarianism, which arose as a spontaneous adaptation to the extreme circumstances of life on the seas, carried over into Libertalia. In part, he speculates, it may also have resulted from contact with indigenous societies on the island of Madagascar.

Intriguingly, he points out that the story of Libertalia has other possible roots in the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century, when for a time radical protestant groups, such as the Levellers, the Diggers and the Ranters, argued for revolutionary change.

Graeber is not alone in making this possible link. Christopher Hill, the English historian, pointed out that when the pirate James Plantain founded a colony in 1720 at Antongil Bay, Madagascar, he gave it the name Ranter Bay.

How much of the story about Libertalia is historical fact, and how much fiction? We don't know, and neither does David Graeber. He writes:

“This is a book about pirate kingdoms, *real and imagined*. (My emphasis). It's also about a time and place where it is very difficult to tell the difference between the two. For about a hundred years, from the end of the seventeenth century toward the close of the next, the east coast of Madagascar was scene to a shadow play of storied pirate kings, pirate atrocities, and pirate utopias, rumors of which shocked, inspired, and entertained the clients of cafés and pubs across the North Atlantic world. There is absolutely no way, from our current vantage, to disentangle these accounts and establish a definitive narrative of which were true and which were not.”

Graeber, David. *Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia* (pp. xii-xiii). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

In writing this book David Graeber was playing with the blurred line between fact and fiction. He writes:

“Let us tell, then, a story about magic, lies, sea battles, purloined princesses, slave revolts, manhunts, make-believe kingdoms and fraudulent ambassadors, spies, jewel thieves, poisoners, devil worship, and sexual obsession that lies at the origins of modern freedom. I hope the reader has as much fun as I did.”

Graeber, David. *Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia* (pp. xii-xiii). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

As one reviewer put it:

“ ... the chief pleasure of Graeber’s writing is not that one always agrees with his arguments about the past. It is rather that, through a series of provocative thought experiments, he repeatedly forces us to reconsider our own ways of living in the present. Whatever happened in 18th-century Madagascar, *Pirate Enlightenment* implies, we could surely all do with a bit more free-thinking and egalitarianism in our own social, sexual and political arrangements.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jan/27/pirate-enlightenment-or-the-real-libertalia-by-david-graeber-review-utopia-by-the-sea>

David Graeber enjoyed playing with pirates.

I’ll have more to say about David Graeber and play later in this talk.

But now on to Sangharakshita and bodhisattvas. What’s the connection with play?

One of the most popular Buddhist texts in the East and in the West is the “*Bodhicaryavatara*”, or “*The Way of the Bodhisattva*”, composed by the Indian monk Shantideva in the eight century.

In the chapter on the Perfection of Vigour, or Energy, Shantideva urges the Bodhisattva to totally immerse themselves in the task they are undertaking with the same intensity of someone thirsting ‘for the pleasure and the fruit of love-play’. (Chapter 7 verse 62)

And then,

“ .. even at the conclusion of one task, one should plunge straight away into the next, as does a tusker (a bull elephant), inflamed by the midday heat, immediately on coming to a pool”. (Chapter 7 verse 65)

(*The Bodhicaryavatara*, Shantideva, translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton)

In his book “*The Bodhisattva Ideal*” Sangharakshita notes that Shantideva’s comparison of the Bodhisattva to an elephant is, in the Indian literary tradition, highly complimentary.

Sangharakshita goes on to describe the elephant as a playful beast, who loves to bathe in lotus ponds, merrily squirting water over himself, trumpeting, and eating great bunches of lotus flowers.

And as soon as he has finished playing in one pond he plunges into another.

Sangharakshita writes:

“So if one is a Bodhisattva, one doesn’t think that one is doing anything very special. One doesn’t think ‘Well, here I am, working for the benefit of all sentient beings.’ One’s manifestation of energy is selfless, a spontaneous bubbling up like a fountain, an uncontrived blossoming like a flower unfolding ...

Sometimes the Bodhisattva’s activity is spoken of as a *līlā* – a sport, a sort of game that the Bodhisattva plays. This is how he or she experiences the manifestation of the perfections, the different aspects of the path to Enlightenment, and eventually the great game of Buddhahood, the manifestation of Enlightenment itself.”

And he concludes:

“This idea of spiritual life as a playful bubbling up of transcendental energy is a prominent feature in Indian thought and religious life. Some people take religion very seriously, even to the extent of feeling that it is somehow blasphemous to laugh in church – but the Bodhisattva’s life isn’t like that. It’s a game, a play, a sport. That is, it is an end in itself, uncalculating, natural, and enjoyable.”

For Sangharakshita, play, then, is an end in itself, uncalculating, natural, and enjoyable.

Barbara Ehrenreich, American author and political activist, comes to a similar conclusion.

She bemoans how scientists, anthropologists, historians and sociologists, always look for an ulterior purpose behind play.

After examining ancient Neolithic rock art and carnival and ecstatic rituals in many societies, she believes that:

“ .. maybe carnival and ecstatic rituals serve no rational purpose and have no single sociological “function.” They are just something that people *do*, and, judging from Neolithic rock art depicting circle and line dances, they are something that people have done for thousands of years.

The best category for such undertakings may be *play*, or exertion for the sheer pleasure of it.”

http://thebaffler.com/past/a_thing_or_two

In that same issue of The Baffler magazine where Ehrenreich writes about play and fun, David Graeber also has his say on the subject of play.

Let's return to David Graeber and what he has to say in his Baffler essay which is entitled “What's the point, if we can't have fun?”

http://thebaffler.com/past/whats_the_point_if_we_cant_have_fun

Graeber starts the essay by pointing out that most scientists who study the behaviour of animals in their natural environment assume that behind any example of play lies an ulterior purpose.

According to most scientists, he argues, any expenditure of energy must be directed toward some goal, whether it be obtaining food, securing territory, achieving dominance, or maximizing reproductive success.

The implication is that any expenditure of energy in what we might describe as play, is ultimately part of the drive for evolutionary survival.

David Graeber points out that from the very beginning of the propagation of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, two competing emphases emerged amongst scientists.

One emphasised competition and the survival of the fittest, and the other emphasised co-operation as the key to evolutionary success.

The co-operative approach was articulated in particular in a book written by the Russian naturalist and anarchist Peter Kropotkin, published in the early 1900s - “*Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*”.

Kropotkin's view was that while competition was undoubtedly one factor driving both natural and social evolution, the role of cooperation was ultimately decisive.

But Kropotkin's view of the importance of animal co-operation went further.

Graeber tells us that Kropotkin argued that much of animal co-operation often has nothing to do with survival or reproduction but is a form of pleasure in itself.

Kropotkin writes that “To take flight in flocks merely for pleasure is quite common among all sorts of birds.”

Kropotkin gives many examples of social play: “pairs of vultures wheeling about for their own entertainment, hares so keen to box with other species that they occasionally (and unwisely) approach foxes, flocks of birds performing military-style maneuvers, bands of squirrels coming together for wrestling and similar games”.

Kropotkin concludes:

“We know at the present time that all animals, beginning with the ants, going on to the birds, and ending with the highest mammals, are fond of plays, wrestling, running after each other, trying to capture each other, teasing each other, and so on. And while many plays are, so to speak, a school for the proper behavior of the young in mature life, there are others which, apart from their utilitarian purposes, are, together with dancing and singing, mere manifestations of an excess of forces—“the joy of life,” and a desire to communicate in some way or another with other individuals of the same or of other species—in short, a manifestation of sociability proper, which is a distinctive feature of all the animal world.”

Sociable play is simply what life is.

Then Graeber poses an even more radical possibility.

He asks us to consider what would happen if we agreed to treat play not just as a principle already present in all living creatures, but also on every level where we find what physicists, chemists, and biologists refer to as “self-organizing systems”.

He acknowledges that we might find such an idea as ‘crazy’, but points out that philosophers of science, faced with the puzzle of how life might emerge from

dead matter or how conscious beings might evolve from microbes, have developed two types of explanations.

The first explanation consists of what's called emergentism. Graeber describes this view:

“The argument here is that once a certain level of complexity is reached, there is a kind of qualitative leap where completely new sorts of physical laws can “emerge”—ones that are premised on, but cannot be reduced to, what came before. In this way, the laws of chemistry can be said to be emergent from physics: the laws of chemistry presuppose the laws of physics but can't simply be reduced to them. In the same way, the laws of biology emerge from chemistry: one obviously needs to understand the chemical components of a fish to understand how it swims, but chemical components will never provide a full explanation. In the same way, the human mind can be said to be emergent from the cells that make it up.”

The second explanation is panpsychism. Graeber explains:

“Those who hold the second position, usually called panpsychism or panexperientialism, agree that all this may be true but argue that emergence is not enough. As British philosopher Galen Strawson recently put it, to imagine that one can travel from insensate matter to a being capable of discussing the existence of insensate matter in a mere two jumps is simply to make emergence do too much work. Something has to be there already, on every level of material existence, even that of subatomic particles—something, however minimal and embryonic, that does some of the things we are used to thinking of life (and even mind) as doing—in order for that something to be organized on more and more complex levels to eventually produce self-conscious beings. That “something” might be very minimal indeed: some very rudimentary sense of responsiveness to one's environment, something like anticipation, something like memory. However rudimentary, it would have to exist for self-organizing systems like atoms or molecules to self-organize in the first place.”

It's important to realise that David Graeber puts forward the panpsychist view because he wishes to defend a materialist view of the universe.

This is a necessary step, he argues, if one does not wish to treat the mind as some supernatural entity imposed on the material world, as would traditionally be argued by the world's monotheisms.

He would rather see the mind “as simply a more complex organization of processes that are already going on, at every level of material reality”. Then, he argues, “it makes sense that something at least a little like intentionality, something at least a little like experience, something at least a little like freedom, would have to exist on every level of physical reality as well”.

In conclusion David Graeber asks us to consider this:

“If an electron is acting freely—if it, as (the quantum physicist) Richard Feynman is supposed to have said, “does anything it likes”—it can only be acting freely as an end in itself. Which would mean that at the very foundations of physical reality, we encounter freedom for its own sake—which also means we encounter the most rudimentary form of play.”

In the last words of an exhilarating essay Graeber writes:

“Now wasn't that fun?”

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/vth8vwzl8rjrs0f8smdsq/03-English-only-David-Graeber.MP3?rlkey=od09vquttqllld2fpt3s6118pp&dl=0>