

BOOK REVIEW

Graeber, David. 2009. *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Edinburgh: AK Press. ISBN 9781904859796. Paperback: 25.95 CAD. Pages: 568.

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Ever since the alter-globalization movement exploded into public consciousness through spectacular summit protests in the late 1990s, a veritable ocean of ink has been spilt by journalists, activists, academics, and others seeking to describe, debunk, define, and defame the contours of this 'movement of movements.' In light of this, David Graeber's *Direct Action* may seem to some to have come rather late to the party, particularly since Graeber's ethnography takes the period from 2000-2003 as its temporal point of focus. So what is left to be said? A casual observer might be provoked to ask this question particularly in light of the claim so often repeated in mainstream sources that the alter-globalization movement declined rapidly in the aftermath of 9/11 and is now largely a social movement fossil relegated to some sedimentary layer of social change history. And yet this is precisely why Graeber's long-awaited ethnography is such an important work. By immersing himself in the socio-political universe of diverse radical struggles constituting the living fabric of the alter-globalization 'movement of movements' in the northeast of North America, Graeber makes two significant contributions: first, his work stands as a testament to the political and analytical utility of ethnography as a form of communication for readers within and beyond the academy; and second, through his ambitious and expansive work he successfully teases out the deep, enduring significance of the direct action ethic and its radical imagination.

While Graeber makes a number of important theoretical points about the larger political relevance of direct action as a radical social change ethos, as he himself insists, theorization is subordinated to the core ethnographic task of describing a particular socio-cultural and political context. At its most basic level ethnography is simply 'culture writing,' a thick description of a given socio-cultural space explored by the ethnographer. As Graeber notes in his preface, this kind of writing is increasingly rare as academic knowledge production is evermore directed toward the advancement of arguments, analytical paradigms, and theoretical points which are then supported through selectively chosen

descriptive moments. Social movement theory has often operated this way with analysts expounding analytical paradigms with specific movement moments then used as the analytical material to prove or disprove these explanatory paradigms concerning contentious action. The end result of so much of this work is elaborate typologies of contentious action bereft of a serious and critical consideration of its significance. Too much academic knowledge about social movements and social change takes the form of an ideological contest between competing theoretical paradigms. Opposed to this ideological warfare is the exploration that Graeber takes up of the living reality of struggle and its social significance.

Direct Action is divided roughly into two sections. The first is a description of the events leading up to and following the Free Trade Area of the Americas protest in Québec City in 2001. The second section is more analytical, taking up a series of issues and elements relating to the contemporary dynamics and significance of direct action as a radical praxis of social transformation. Drawing heavily upon detailed excerpts from fieldnotes taken at organizing meetings, actions, and social encounters, Graeber's ethnography not only sheds tremendous light upon the internal dynamics and living realities of direct action and consensus-based decision making but does so in a narrative style that is impressively jargon-free and readable. Often narrating key moments, events, and processes through the use of direct dialogues between a diverse cast of participants, Graeber's text possesses an urgency and immediacy that allows us to appreciate these movements as social experiments in living otherwise. The success of the second, analytical part of the book is that Graeber teases out the complex significance of a diversity of phenomena orbiting in and around the direct action alter-globalization movement from the black bloc to consensus-based decision making to the symbolic importance of police and puppets. Eschewing grand theorizing in favour of an approach that attends closely to the complex and often ambivalent significance of living realities, Graeber critically illuminates the importance of the attempts at radical social transformation emerging from the direct action constellation within the anti-capitalist alter-globalization movement. While this kind of exploration has been made theoretically before, the contribution of Graeber's work is that it advances this analysis by focusing on social realities themselves as they were constituted in the context of this movement. In this way, the theory becomes immanent to the text and really succeeds in capturing the radical possibility of social transformation made by anti-capitalist, direct democracy, direct action elements of the alter-globalization movement in the north.

Graeber's text is a tremendously significant contribution to critical social research that is accessible to a broad audience beyond the university. As an anthropologist, I would add that it also stands as a testament to the power of a well-crafted ethnography to open windows onto other social possibilities. The only moment I found myself vaguely dissatisfied with the text is at the end confronted by its intentionally absent conclusion. Graeber disavows the notion that ethnographies should have conclusions. As he writes in the first paragraph of the book's final chapter, 'If the aim of an ethnographic description is to try to give the reader the means to imaginatively pass inside a moral and social universe, then it seems exploitative, insulting almost, to suggest that other people live their lives or pursue their projects in order to allow some scholar to score a point in some arcane theoretical debate' (509). I take his point and concede that perhaps this is more about a reader's more conventional expectations than an author's choices. Even were it to stand, *Direct Action* is undiminished as an example of radical knowledge production that contributes to rather than commodifies radical struggles for a more democratic and dignified world.