

DAVID GRAEBER, BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE,
AND THE CRITIQUE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT

With his ability to almost historicize everything and find anthropological insight in historical patterns and connections, David Graeber was one of the most radical and interesting intellectuals of our times. His political engagement inspired generations of activists across the world, and his theories deconstructed most of our western-centric understandings of human nature, economic life and anthropological processes. This article explores how Graeber's work on bureaucratic violence, technology and imagination sheds a critical light on the emergence of what is commonly understood as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019). In this article, the author reflects on the legacy of her mentor, and shows how Graeber's theory adds historical depth and anthropological insight into the techno-historical transformations of our times. His work enables us to understand the limitations to human freedom created by our use of data technologies and to reflect on the fact that we are creating a type of society that reinforces and amplifies the things that Graeber criticised most: social inequality and human reductionism.

Keywords: Graeber, Surveillance Capitalism, Bureaucracy, Violence, Data Technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Marshall Sahlins himself is a representative of one grand tradition in anthropology – perhaps the very grandest – that of the activist intellectual, engaged in social movements, but at the same time whose anthropological writings are if anything more politically important, because

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they are aimed at having an impact on popular understandings of social, domestic, political and economic possibilities.

Graeber 2017: 3

These are the words used by David Graeber to describe his mentor, in the forward to *Stone Age Economics*. When I read it, I immediately thought that life is always full of magical irony. In describing his mentor, Graeber summarised – in one paragraph – himself. David Graeber was the perfect representative of the activist intellectual, who dedicated his life to political activism, and was so deeply involved in social movements that he came to influence and inspire them in substantial ways. When he died on the 2nd of September 2020, in Venice, the newspapers from all over the world paid their tributes to the anarchist anthropologist, who had coined the term “We are the 99%” for the Occupy movement. In the sadness of his death, I smiled. I knew David would have hated both, to be called the anarchist anthropologist and to have been given credit for coining the term we are the 99%, because he always explained that it was actually the product of a collective work. Yet I could not but feel that between the lines there was something extraordinarily true about those articles that painted Graeber as a kind of intellectual hero. Over the last 20 years he has inspired and continues to inspire generations of activists from all over the world.

There is something more that emerges from the above quote. Graeber believed that the importance of Sahlins’ work needs to be found in its impact “on popular understandings of social, domestic, political and economic possibilities” (2017: 3). The same can, and should be said about the work of David Graeber. His work enables us to imagine the multiple possibilities of human life; it deconstructs, revolutionises and trashes most of western-centric understandings of human nature, economic life and anthropological processes. It opens our eyes in a radical way, yet at the same time with a genuine nonchalance. This was Graeber’s talent. “He had a way of communicating ideas considered radical that made them sound like common sense” (Economopoulos 2020: para 1). Like Sahlins’ work does, also Graeber’s work really teaches all of us that “human possibilities are always in every way greater than we ordinarily imagine” (Graeber 2007: 1). It is for this reason that – after his death – Marshall Sahlins, wrote: “One of David’s books is titled *Possibilities*. It is an apt description of all his work. It is an even better title for his life. Offering unimagined possibilities of freedom was his gift to us”. (Sahlins 2020: para 4).

Sahlins was Graeber’s mentor and Graeber was mine. I worked for David as teaching assistant for two years between 2009-2011. He was also my supervisor in the last year of my PhD. David’s humanity, genius and politi-

cal imagination influenced not only the last years of my PhD but my entire career. I still remember his long monologues, which radiated in all sorts and unexpected directions, as he was writing *Debt the first 5000 years*. I also remember what a great listener he was. He listened with curiosity, care and without judgement.

In this article, in this special issue dedicated to Sahlins' work, I want to cherish the gift that according to Sahlins Graeber left us. I want to explore how his work on value, technology and bureaucratic violence sheds a critical light on the emergence of what is commonly understood as "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2018). I also want to show how his theories enable us to truly understand the limitations to human freedom created by our use of data technologies and AI systems. Through his theories I want to argue that the rise of surveillance capitalism – or as he would call it the extension of corporate bureaucracy – has led to the creation of a type of society that reinforces and amplifies the things that Graeber criticised most: social inequality and human reductionism.

1. THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM OR SIMPLY THE EXTENSION OF CORPORATE BUREAUCRACY?

There was something unique in David Graeber's anthropology. Graeber had an incredible ability to work backwards in history to gather anthropological insight. He used this insight to re-think the dominant economic and political narratives and re-imagine the multiple possibilities of human life. He dwelled on different cultural forms, on forgotten ways of saying to critically put into question our everyday life, economic beliefs, and political formations. It was this unique ability that defined the international success of his book *Debt: The first 5000 years* (2011). In the book Graeber deconstructed western-centric understandings of human nature and economic life by exploring across cultures and throughout history the importance of debt. The book opens our eyes in a radical way and to some degree re-writes economic history as we know it. Yet *Debt* is only one of the many different examples of books where Graeber's ability – to re-think our present through a re-writing of the past – comes to the fore.

I have personally realised that many of his essays, especially for their historical inquiry, enable us to find key insights into our times, and the so called rise of surveillance capitalism. Over the last decades we witnessed a 'revolution' of a sort; one that has transformed the ways in which we relate to 'data'. This understanding – if stripped from techno-deterministic perspectives – sheds light on some of the crucial techno-historical developments of our times. In the last decade, we have not only seen the rise

of supercomputers able to integrate larger and larger datasets and key developments in machine learning, but we also witnessed governing institutions, educational bodies, healthcare providers, businesses of all kinds and multiple other agents restructuring their everyday practices and beliefs to focus on the gathering, accumulation and analysis of individual data (Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier 2013).

The practice of collection and surveillance of individual data has long existed. From the censuses of ancient civilizations to the establishment of the modern nation state, societies have historically surveilled and governed citizens through their personal data (Hintz *et al.* 2018). However, the 1970s and 1980s brought about a significant transformation in data monitoring especially in countries like the US and Europe. Clarke (1988) coined the term 'dataveillance' to describe this transformation which saw the reduction in practices of face-to-face surveillance and an increase in the surveillance of citizens' data. According to Clarke (1988) the increased surveillance of citizen's data was made possible not only by emerging technologies and digital practices, but also by the fact that governing bodies and institutions encouraged and reinforced the production of citizen's data traces. Over the last decade, we have seen an intensification of such invasive practices of dataveillance and the emergence of an economic system which is based on the understanding that data is capital (Bellamy-Foster and McChesney 2014; Zuboff 2015, 2019).

To map this techno-historical transformation, different scholars have relied on the concept of *surveillance capitalism*. According to Bellamy Foster and McChesney (2014), surveillance capitalism established itself over the last decades as a political economic system defined by the relations of power between governments, military powers, secret agencies, the financial sector, advertisers, internet monopolies and multiple other agents who surveilled, controlled and capitalized on individual data (Bellamy-Foster and McChesney 2014). In her work, Zuboff (2015, 2019) brought their argument further and explored the ever-growing networked infrastructure of surveillance capitalism by considering the role played by companies like Google, Amazon and Facebook, which constantly sought new ways to turn personal data into value (Zuboff 2015, 2019). Zuboff (2019) argued that it was Google that played a fundamental role in the emergence of surveillance capitalism, when in 2002 the company discovered that data traces could be transformed in behavioural surplus. The company, she argued, played a very similar role to the one played by Ford Motor Company and General Motors in the establishment of Industrial capitalism. This is because, according to Zuboff (2019) Google has not only introduced a new economic logic which revolved around data extraction, accumulation and analysis, but the discovery of behavioural surplus has affected human prac-

tices and behaviours, re-structured institutions and transformed everyday life.

With his ability to almost historize everything and find anthropological insight in historical patterns and connections, David Graeber never discussed the ‘turn to data’ as the rise of a new economic system, or as the emergence of the new age of surveillance capitalism like Zuboff does. His analytical eye did not focus on disruption and novelty, rather on the dialectical relationship between continuity and change. In his collection of essays *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joy of Bureaucracy* (2015) he shows that what has paved the way for what we see today is not really the role played by tech-companies like Google but actually a structural transformation of corporate bureaucracy away from the workers, and towards shareholders and eventually towards the financial structure as a whole. According to Graeber this structural transformation, led to a double movement of a sort. On the one hand corporate management became more financialized, on the other hand the financial sector became more corporatized. As a result the investor and executive class became indistinguishable, and hence numbers, measures and bureaucratization became associated with value production.

One of the most fascinating aspects of David Graeber’s theory of transformation in corporate bureaucracy is that he shows how this led to a broader cultural transformation whereby bureaucratic techniques (performance reviews, focus groups, time allocation surveys...), which developed in the financial and corporate sector invaded different dimensions of society – education, science, government – and eventually pervaded every aspect of everyday life (Graeber 2015: 19-21). There is thus something extraordinarily similar between David Graeber’s analysis corporate bureaucracy and the ones of scholars like Zuboff (2019), who was writing about the rise of surveillance capitalism or people like Kitchin (2014), describing the rise of big data. These works all talk about a datafication of everyday life, where our practices, beliefs and organisational modes have started to be concerned with the gathering, accumulation and processing of numbers, figures, and scores.

Also Zuboff and other scholars writing on these topics talk about the 1970s and financialization as key turning points in this transformation. Yet whilst scholars like Zuboff (2019) and many others focus on the business models of the tech industry, David Graeber believed that the idea that we are living in a world created by computers (or the tech-industry) is a big mistake. It is for this reason that he argued that of course we need to recognize that our everyday experience of bureaucratization is entirely caught up in ICT, but that we cannot understand this digital transformation without looking at the rise of corporate bureaucracy and new understandings of value (Graeber 2015: 40).

2. INNOVATION, VALUE AND THE CULTURE OF EVALUATION

Graeber was a versatile and prolific scholar; he addressed an incredible variety of anthropological questions which span from bureaucracy to narratives, from money and debt to processes of imagination. Yet there was one topic that was close to his heart, and which is a recurring theme in all of his scholarship: the concept of value. His *Toward Anthropological Theory of Value: the False Coins of our own Dream* (2001), has been heralded as a classic of anthropological theory, precisely because he re-interpreted traditional ethnographic descriptions to show how value is a fundamental form of human-meaning making, and for this reason it defines all of our cultural practices, beliefs and organisational choices. I am sure that anyone who knew Graeber would agree with me that the notion of value (in all its anthropological complexity: e.g. value as values, value as economic idea, value as linguistic hierarchy) was a key research question for him, something that he would always return to in one way or other. After his death, when I finally got myself to read the *Utopia of Rules*, which had been on my reading list for a long time, I could not but smile, when after criticising techno-deterministic understandings of historical change, Graeber wrote: always remember it's all ultimately about value (Graeber 2015: 36).

Similarly to Zuboff and others, also Graeber believed that there had been a shift over the last decades in the ways in which we think about value in relation to algorithms and data. In fact he claimed: "algorithms and mathematical formulae by which the world comes to be assessed become, ultimately, not just the measures of value but the source of value" (Graeber 2015: 41). The promise (and value) of AI systems and big data lies in predictive analytics; in the understanding that the aggregation of data can highlight behavioural patterns, which then can enable organisations of all kinds to somehow 'predict the future' and to mitigate risk (Lohr 2015). Today predictive analytics is used in many different domains of social life, by educators in schools who believe in creating personalized education, by banks, insurers and recruiters who need to decide loans, premiums or whether one is a good fit for a job or not. Predictive analytics is also used by the police (Dencik *et al.* 2016), by immigration enforcement, and by governmental institutions who decide a variety of issues from child protection to social welfare (Eubanks 2018) and of course by secret services.

We cannot really explore the rapid development of predictive analytics without looking at Graeber's work on bureaucracy. In fact, Graeber shows how the rise of corporate bureaucracy led to the establishment of a 'culture of evaluation'. He argues that much of what bureaucrats do is to 'evaluate things' as "they are continually assessing, auditing, measuring, weighting

the relative merits of different plans, proposals, applications etc.” (Graeber 2015: 41) and of course I would add constantly evaluating human beings. This culture of evaluation, he believes, is not only the product of financialization but the continuation of it since “what is the world of securitized derivatives, collateralized debt obligations, and other such exotic financial instruments but the apotheosis of the principle that value is ultimately a product of paperwork” (Graeber 2015: 42).

From an anthropological perspective there is something extremely familiar in this process of evaluation and paperwork, as it has a lot to say about the rituals through which we make things socially true. As Graeber shows, for years anthropologists looked at ritual action to highlight the different ritual gestures or sentences (e.g. I now pronounce you man and wife) which made things socially true. Graeber believed that in our societies it is paperwork that makes things socially true (eg. Birth certificates, passports etc.) (Graeber 2015: 49-50). Yet I would argue that today machine learning and digital profiling are gradually replacing paperwork in this process of ‘make things socially true’. As I show in my own work, we are living at an historical time when individuals are turned into data subjects even before they are born, and these digital profiles are used to determine social truths about them and to make data driven decisions about their lives¹ (Barassi 2020).

One important aspect that we need to take into account when we think about these processes of digital profiling is the fact that, as Taylor (2017) argued, data technologies often sort, profile and inform action based on group rather than individual characteristics and behaviour (ethnicity, class, family etc.). Therefore, we are being profiled on the basis of our social networks and the people that can be associated to us through algorithmic predictions. The problem of these digital profiles is not only that they are often stereotypical, biased and discriminatory but also that they clash with the complex process of social production in which we are often agents.

¹ We can date the rise of practices of digital profiling, as we understand them today, back to the beginning of the 2000s when dataveillant practices were integrated with new technologies for identification and authentication of individual citizens (ELMER 2004; HILDEBRANDT and GUTWIRTH 2008; SOLOVE 2004). Yet over the last decades something changed. We live in a world where a plurality of machines have the processing power to cross-reference large, enormous, amounts of our personal data and profile us in often obscure ways. They use the data that we produce – and the one that others produce about us – to track us throughout our lives so that they can find out our behavioral patterns. With this data they make assumptions about psychological tendencies and construct narratives about who we are. We have no control over the narratives produced through private algorithmic profiling and AI systems, even when these narratives are discriminatory and wrong (EUBANKS 2018; GANGADHARAN 2012, 2015; NOBLE 2018).

Graeber's work on value offers us a unique perspective into how these dated narratives do not take into account the value and creativity of social production. One of Graeber's theories – that has perhaps influenced me most – is his use of Marx's labour theory of value to understand social production. Graeber drew from Marxist anthropologists like Maurice Bloch and Terry Turner and believed that there is much to be gained from a symbolic reading of Marx's labour theory of value. In fact, Marx has shown that human beings produce their symbols (money/commodity), and after ascribing an extraordinary power to them (fetishism), they organise their actions around these symbols (Marx 1990). In his book *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion and Desire* (2007), Graeber following Turner decided to apply Marx's Labour Theory of Value to the analysis of the 'production of social relationships' as a way to produce human wealth/value [Turner 2006 (1984): 12]. The result was the creation of a fascinating theoretical approach which demonstrated not only that social relationships are often 'produced', but that they have a great representative power.

This approach enables us to fully appreciate the symbolic dimension of social relationships, and their intrinsic value. In many occasions, people produce (or consolidate) social relationships, because these social relationships can be abstracted and become the representation of some form of individual or collective meaning. What Graeber's work shows us is that often we produce our social relationships in such a way that they can be seen as a form of language, a language that we use to construct our sense of identity and belonging and to push forward specific cultural values. This is the creativity and complexity of social life. At the moment, we are allowing bureaucratic technologies to mediate this creative and complex processes of social production and build social truths about our lives and our social relationships. The question that we need to ask ourselves – then – is at what cost? To answer this question I believe Graeber's theory of corporate bureaucracy and structural violence are a fundamental starting point.

3. DIGITAL PROFILING, STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND THE DEAD ZONES OF THE IMAGINATION

There is something inescapable and oppressive about digital profiling that has a lot to say about the circularity and senseless of processes of bureaucratization. It is for this reason that Solove (2004) argued that when we think about digital profiling we need to abandon the common used metaphor of Orwell's Big Brother and we need instead to focus on Kafka's *Trial*. According to Solove (2004), Kafka depicted "an indifferent bureaucracy, where individuals are pawns, not knowing what is happening, having

no say or ability to exercise meaningful control over the process” (Solove 2004: 37), and he believed that through digital profiling individuals were being subjected to the bureaucratic process with little intelligent control or limitation; a process which dictated whether they could board a flight, buy an insurance, or be a good employee (Solove 2004: 39).

In his work on bureaucracy Graeber’s aim was to talk about bureaucratic oppression by looking at the concept of violence. In the *Utopia of Rules* he is obviously influenced by the legacy (or as he would say the hegemony) of Weber’s concept of iron cage and Foucault’s notion of biopower in understanding bureaucratic oppression. Yet he pushes his argument further. By referring to the feminist anthropological literature and a re-reading of the concept of structural violence, Graeber argues that the bureaucratization of everyday life is always built on some ‘threat’ of physical violence.

The threat of physical violence he believes can be seen everywhere, but we have been so used to it that we actually don’t see it. It is embodied in the many security guards, cameras, technologies and enforcers entering different areas of social lives from schools to parks and public spaces, who are there to remind us that we have to stick to the rules or have the right papers. So bureaucratic violence manifests itself structurally, in the way we live, in the way we interact with bureaucratic agents, and we embody the spaces of our society. Yet the violence of bureaucratization cannot only be perceived as the threat of physical violence but also as “a near-total inequality of power between the bureaucratic structure and individuals” (Graeber 2015: 59-60). When we interact with bureaucratic agents we know that the relationship is not equal and we feel the pressure of that inequality.

Now one fascinating aspect of David’s theory of bureaucratic violence is represented by the fact that he believed that bureaucracy leads to the creation of dead zones of the imagination. If, as I said before, the concept of value was close to Graeber’s heart, another fundamental concept of his work was imagination. Influenced by Marx’s understanding that imagination is a creative productive force, Graeber believed that it is precisely in the anthropological process of the imagination that we can find the key to social inequalities. In *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion and Desire* (2006) but also in *Revolution in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art and Imagination* (2011), he argues that the people who are in a position of social inequality find themselves doing a complex work of the imagination or ‘interpretative work’. This is clear, according to Graeber, if we think of women. How many wives, lovers, domestic helpers have so often found themselves ‘imagining’ the needs of the man of the house. I did not grow up with a father, but I remember well how much imaginative work it took my grandmother and mother (and by extension me and my sister) to make my grandfather happy. It is precisely this interpretative work, according to

Graeber, that distinguishes women from men and in general all classes, ethnic groups and social groups that find themselves in a position of subordination from those who are instead in a situation of power.

In the *Utopia of Rules* (2015), Graeber returns to these ideas to show that the bureaucrats and – by extension any of their systems – do not have to engage in this form of interpretative work, and he believes that this is in itself a form of structural violence. It is the structural violence of bureaucratic systems that sheds light on why we often understand bureaucracy as irrational, stupid and senseless. In fact he explains:

Violence's capacity to allow arbitrary decisions, and thus to avoid the kind of debate, clarification and renegotiation typical of more egalitarian social relationships, is obviously what allows its victims to see procedures created on the basis of violence as stupid or unreasonable (Graeber 2015: 66).

Bureaucratic violence is thus created by a lack of imagination, openness and debate. Now one aspect that emerges really clearly in Graeber's work and that we need to take into account, if we want to fully understand the impact of AI and automated decision making on our society, is the fact that bureaucratic violence is not experienced equally by everyone. Historically the everyday experience of bureaucratic violence, Graeber argues (2015) is different for the poor or marginal communities, because they have constantly been exposed to continued surveillance, monitoring, auditing and to the lack of interpretative work of the bureaucratic machine.

If we understand current automated systems as an amplification of this process of total bureaucratization described by Graeber, then we cannot be surprised by the growing literature on automated inequality. In 2016, the American mathematician Cathy O'Neil wrote a book titled *Weapons of Math Destruction*, in which she argued that algorithmic models are biased and lead to data-driven decisions that reinforce racism and harm the poor. In the same year Barocas and Selbst (2016) published an article calling on the public, researchers, and policy makers to understand the disparate impact of big data on different sections of society. In 2018, Eubanks' book titled *Automating Inequality* was particularly important because it showed that in the US there is something profoundly unequal and unjust about the different ways in which data harms impact white or high-income families on the one hand, and low-income families or ethnic minorities on the other.

What is becoming clear is that data technologies and automated systems are not equal or fair, and the experience of data harms depends on one's position in society. This emerges well in the work of the legal scholar Gilman (2012) who shows that the poor are more exposed to privacy intrusions by government surveillance and other agents, and that current

privacy law does not address the disparity of experience. Marginal communities are more exposed to privacy intrusion and data harms, because in their everyday life they are subjected to systemic surveillance and discrimination, like Graeber's work on bureaucracy shows. In addition to this, as Medden *et al.* (2017) have rightly argued, poor and marginal communities are exposed to "networked privacy harms", because they are held liable for the actions of those in their networks and neighborhoods.

I am not sure whether David read the above works, but I am sure that he would have not been at all surprised by their findings, and these findings are actually crucial to understanding the contemporary historical moment. In fact they demonstrate that if processes of structural inequality have always defined bureaucratization, automation is not only perpetuating this structural inequality but is actually amplifying it. In this framework, Graeber's work on structural violence and the dead zones of imagination, is there to shed light on the techno-historical transformations of our times, and to show us the profound democratic challenges that we are facing.

4. THE VIOLENCE OF DATA REDUCTIONISM

Social Inequality was a key theme in Graeber's work. Graeber was raised in New York by a Jewish family of left-wing working class intellectuals. Since he was a child he was exposed to the social injustice of the American system. Despite being exposed to social inequality, Graeber deeply believed in human possibilities. He was convinced that Western culture had been influenced by Hobbes, Adam Smith, and a bizarre obsession with the ancient Greeks and that this had led us to a profoundly wrong view of humanity and human instincts. He also believed that our lack of faith in the community, in self-management, in mutual respect – lack of faith often translated into a need for rules, authority, repressive systems – was the result of a cultural and political construction. He owes this interpretation of history to his mentor Marshall Sahlins. In his book *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (2008), Sahlins explains how Western civilization has been haunted by the spectre of a selfish, greedy and quarrelsome human nature that must be kept at bay by rules and authority. Sahlins also explains how this idea of greedy and warmongering humanity was reinforced by those who held social power. It also shows that this 'illusion' about human nature has nothing to do with human instincts.

Together with Graeber, Sahlins wrote another book, *On Kings* (2017), where they analyse the historical and anthropological role of kings. Together they demonstrate how the study of kings offers us a unique perspective not only on the nature of power, but on how we interpret nature

and the human condition. We live with the idea that greed and selfishness are fundamental human instincts, and we forget how we are continually exposed to forms of altruism, empathy, and collective solidarity.

It is in this understanding of humanity, in the acknowledgement not only that human possibilities are always in every way greater than we believe (Graeber 2007: 1) but also that our societies are based on a misconception and judgment of human nature, that we find Graeber's most precious insight into the impact of data technologies and AI innovation. We live in a world where data and algorithmic profiling are understood as holding the key to human nature and behaviour. We are profiled and judged by algorithms and on the basis of our data traces. Companies and data brokers use algorithms to process the data of individuals and sell the illusion that it is actually possible to translate human experience and nature in data points. Yet the data processed by algorithms is often the product of everyday human practices, which are messy, incomplete and contradictory, and algorithmic predictions are filled with inaccuracies, partial truths and misrepresentations. Even if we can trace connections and patterns this does not necessarily mean that the knowledge we acquire from these connections and patterns is accurate.

In a thought-provoking paper, Costanza-Chock (2018) considers how human identity and experience are violated and belittled by binary data systems and computer reductionism, which do not take into account the variety and complexity of human existence. During my research on the datafication of family life, I met different participants that discussed their fears, anxieties and worries as they realised that they were being "belittled, minimized, and invaded by data". Some would discuss how algorithms like the Facebook algorithm would constantly mis-interpret their intentions and desires, others instead told me that they felt that the data-trackers and companies on the internet were like 'gossipers' coming to conclusions about their personal life on the basis of scattered information. It was by listening to these stories, and by researching cases of algorithmic bias and data harm, that I came to the conclusion that there is a fundamental error in algorithms when it comes to human profiling. Similarly to Costanza-Chock (2018), I also believe that computer systems and algorithms cannot account for the complexity of human experience.

The machines that we are building are actually machines that offer us simplified and reductionist understandings of human behaviour; they stereotype individuals often on the basis of mis-construed and ideological narratives of human nature. One of the main problems of these narratives is that they often come to define us in public, and produce social truths about us like Graeber would say. The practice of human profiling has long existed, and many times we have not been agents in processes of self-construction;

we have often been judged on the basis of stereotypical understandings of our social backgrounds. Yet today something new is happening. On a daily basis every little detail of an individual's life is turned into a data point from before birth (Barassi 2020) and AI systems and algorithmic models harness this data to profile us, judge us and make data-driven decisions about us in ways that we cannot understand or control. As I have argued above, these technologies are used everywhere from schools to health professionals, from employers to governing institutions.

One of the main problems with this transformation is the fact that too often we forget that these technologies are human made and that they are filled with systemic 'errors', 'biases' and 'inaccuracies'. We also forget that these technologies present us with simplified, reductionist and mis-construed understandings of human nature. Yet we need to remember that like Graeber teaches us, our relationship to these technologies – like any form of bureaucracy – is utopian. Afterall: "Is this not what we always say of utopians that they have a naïve faith in the perfectability of human nature and refuse to deal with humans as they actually are?" (Graeber 2015: 48).

5. HUMAN POSSIBILITIES, CORPORATE BUREAUCRACY AND THE LIMITS OF OUR TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

When I was teaching with Graeber, I used to get extremely frustrated by what I often perceived as David's lack of interest in critical internet research, which was the key area of my work. I was reading texts on social media and data technologies and discussing with David about my findings but I always felt that he was not interested in everyday tech-practices and uses. For instance, while I was working on the research for *Activism on the Web* (2015) and analysing how activist cultures were using, understanding and critically negotiating with social media technologies and digital capitalism, Graeber had just written *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (2009). When I read the book, and especially the chapter on Representation, I really questioned why he chose not to engage with any of the questions on digital activism that I was dealing with and other activist anthropologists like Juris (2008) and Wolfson (2013) were also addressing. I felt that he was missing an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of technological structures and cultural practices.

It took me ten years to finally realise how wrong I was. Although not focusing directly on digital anthropology, Graeber's scholarship is key to unpacking the data-driven world we are living in and the implications of AI innovation. One of Graeber's amazing talents was his ironic clarity. He

played with concepts and ideas in such a way that made you look at things in a radically different way. This understanding applies also to his analysis of technological change. In his essay on *Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit* (2012) he starts by questioning why on earth we do not have flying cars, or social robots and all the other inventions that he dreamed of when he was a child, which defined the narrative of most science fiction films from the 1950s to the 1980s. In his book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (2019) he follows a similar provocative line of reasoning when he questions why Keynes' prediction that technological developments would enable us to work a 15-hour-week did not come true. In both instances he believes that we have been confronted with a sense of broken promise and disappointment, which he describes in his own words in the *Utopia of Rules* (2015):

Speaking as someone who was eight years old at the time of the Apollo moon landing, I have very clear memories of calculating that I would be thirty-nine years of age in the magic year 2000, and wondering what the world around me would be like. Did I honestly expect I would be living in a world of such wonders? Of course. Everyone did. And do I feel cheated now? Absolutely (Graeber 2015: 106).

By focusing on his own disappointment, on the broken promises of the technological revolution Graeber wants to argue – in contrast even to Marx – that it is not true that capitalism necessarily leads to technological progress. On the contrary he believes that the direction that technology took over the last decades has been influenced on the one hand by the alliance between finance and corporate bureaucracy and on the other by military research. This bureaucratization (but also militarization) of technological innovation, according to Graeber, stalled innovation and creativity as we understand it, and prevented us from imagining the many radical ways in which technological change could transform our society.

Graeber believed that technological creativity had been stalled because, over the last decades, we have been moving away from *poetic technologies* to *bureaucratic technologies*. (Graeber 2015: 141). The poetic technologies (and he uses the term technologies in broad sense) can be understood as all those 'machines' or 'systems' (e.g. the systems put in place to build pyramids or factories etc) that humans built throughout history that have been put to work to realize impossible fantasies: cathedrals, moon shoots, transcontinental railways, and on and on.² The bureaucratic technologies instead are precisely the reverse of poetic technologies, they are not there to enable us to build our visions and fantasies but to reinforce bureaucratic

² Please note that Graeber was aware that the 'poetry' of these technologies could also become associated to dark intents.

imperatives. Today, administrative imperatives have become not the means but the end of technological development (Graeber 2015: 142).

If we look at current tech-design, or dwell on the ways in which we use AI technologies to track, document, or create data out of everyday life we clearly see what Graeber meant by the rise of bureaucratic technologies or the era of total bureaucratization. Our cultural and social obsession with processes of data accumulation as well as with the quantification of everyday life cannot really be understood without considering the extension of corporate bureaucracy. In this regard Graeber's argument really adds historical depth and anthropological insight to the so-called rise of surveillance capitalism. Yet it also pushes us to go further. In fact, as Sahlins (2020) rightly noticed, Graeber's work enables us also to reflect on the possibilities of freedom. His theory of technology and bureaucracy is a vivid expression of this, because it makes us realise that there are multiple ways in which we could have imagined and enacted technological innovation, beyond the imperatives of corporate bureaucracy, and puts us in front of our society's failure.

CONCLUSION

With his ability to almost historize everything and find anthropological insight in historical patterns and connections, Graeber's theory on bureaucracy, structural violence and imagination, is there to shed light on the techno-historical transformations of our times. Graeber was eccentric, brilliant, he was a great anthropologist. For me, he had one thing that set him apart from all the people I've met in my life: he had immense faith in human possibilities. Graeber was really convinced that we could build a different society. He did not like to be called an anarchist anthropologist, but he saw anarchy as an ethical choice, as a way of life. He truly believed that a more just society could be built. Some colleagues that I have met on my way have told me that they often felt alienated when reading Graeber because they did not agree with him politically. I strongly believe that Graeber's work cannot be understood as separated from his political activism. Yet I also believe that we can and should go over any political polarization and appreciate the beauty, creativity and importance of his work.

When I received the news about his death, I read many tribute articles to David Graeber, full of praise especially for his work on *Debt* (2011) or *Bullshit Jobs* (2019). I greatly appreciate his work in economic anthropology, and his ability to make Adam Smith, Keynes and the founders of modern capitalism appear as mere men, influenced – like all of us – by cultural and

ideological preconceptions. I understand the success of *Debt* or *Bullshit Jobs*, David together with Sahlins is truly one of the greatest economic anthropologists of our time. Whilst recognizing David's intellectual greatness in this matter, the theories that really changed my perspective on things and that I will miss most are his theories on imagination, value and bureaucratic violence.

With this article I wanted to honor those theories, I wanted to show how crucial they are for the understanding of the techno-historical transformation that we are living. This was my way to elaborate Graeber's death, my own form of paperwork to make David's death personally true to me. After all, as he has shown, death is ultimately about rituals of paperwork. Yet death is even more complicated (than other rituals): "because those same social relationship that one has acquired in life have to be gradually severed, rearranged. It often takes years, repeated burials (even re-burials) burning, bleaching and rearranging of bones, feasts and ceremonies before someone is entirely dead" (Graeber 2015: 50).

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