The ontological gambit: Ethnography, ontology, and politics in David Graeber and OTers' proposals

Vicente Ordóñez

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid, Spain, vordonez@fsof.uned.es

Abstract

This brief essay will tackle recent anthropological debates between OTers (proponents of the *ontological turn* in anthropology) and David Graeber's arguments regarding ontology, politics and ethnographic theory. To be specific, it will attempt to critically reveal the tendency to fetishise a kind of stable and hierarchical reality to understand better the so-called radical alterity of the others. This ontological framework is a kind of ideal realm developed in the context of competing claims of what is real. However, this raises a straightforward question: how could a group of anthropologists apparently concerned exclusively with ethnographic aspects of a tribe, clan, or society offer the basis for an ontological program? Instead, I suggest that Graeber's works raise awareness of the experience and effects of this ideological framework. I then turn to the theoretical contributions of my study as a way of showing that Graeber attempts to untie the slipknot of cultural and ideological prejudices. At any rate, Graeber offers an anti-ontological agenda, exposing, among others, either consciously or unconsciously assumed political cosmologies that contribute to submission and dispossession.

KEYWORDS: David Graeber, ethnography, ontology, politics, anthropology

Introduction

In the previous decade, anthropology scholars have witnessed a hustle and bustle of theoretical contention focused on the debate regarding the "ontological turn" proponents (commonly known as OTers) and David Graeber. Neither Oters' nor David Graeber's unexpected and grievous loss provide an endpoint for the argument, but rather the interrelations set up the means by which the subtleties of OTers can be counterbalanced through Graeber's claims and vice versa. To avoid the hubbub and introduce the main arguments of both OTers and David Graeber, it would be reasonable to begin with the problematic issue at stake, namely, to consider whether it is possible or not to describe a whole series of rituals, gestures, actions or expressions of a social group totally alien to the anthropological observer using Western concepts as encompassing linguistic tools. OTers' position, summarised by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's critique, points to two main flaws of David Graeber's reflections on fetishism as social creativity: first, the inadequacy to endorse theories of social power to the Merina natives; second, in order to decolonise thought, one has to avoid the imposition of statements that reinforce rather than describe the explicit point of view of Western ontology (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 13).

Viveiros de Castro assessment relies mainly on previous Marcio Goldman's reception of David Graeber's paper *Fetishism as social creativity: or, Fetishes are gods in the process of construction* (2005).[1] Goldman emphasised, first, that the discourse about fetishes 'continue to be silenced in favor of what Euro-Americans, whether merchants or anthropologists, consider fundamental'; secondly, 'Graeber's attempt to save Marx starts with what is most problematic and least original in Marxism, namely, the scientism that he shares with most thinkers of his century'; finally, 'in order to rescue the Africans (and Marxism), Graeber seems to believe it necessary to condemn the Europeans (or at least the capitalists). They are really the only ones who have deceived themselves with respect to the nature of collective life' (2009, pp. 110-111).

Graeber response underlined, first, that his paper was 'explicitly an attempt to employ ethnography to problematise Marxist theoretical categories'; secondly, he argues 'that the examples of BaKongo *nkisi* and Malagasy *ody* can teach us something unexpected about humans everywhere': finally, anthropological categories 'show that in certain ways, at least, such alterity was not quite as radical as we thought, and we can put those apparently exotic concepts to work to reexamine our own everyday assumptions and to say something new about human beings in general'. Nevertheless, these issues led to the

---

[1] I quote David Graber's paper in its final version (2007).

fundamental underlying question: 'which is the approach best suited to support those who are trying to challenge those structures of power and authority, and in what ways?' (Graeber, 2015, pp. 5-6).

To move the more contentious aspects of both positions forward, challenging topics are raised and compel the researcher by deepening and broadening inquiry. Indeed, the main arguments of the contest force anthropologists, ethnographers, and philosophers, but also sociologists, linguists, and even physicists, to reconsider core statements about the world, the apprehension of being, the way humans understand things or the nature of power. Moreover, they compel the researcher to reevaluate political assumed logics; for instance, once she or he deals with ruler-less or *an-archic* societies in which order comes in the absence of powerful authority, political relations are created from within not outside the community itself, or anti-hierarchical practices result from communal consensus, one has to reassess the very basis of her or his opinions and beliefs. Therefore, I will start by analysing David Graeber's ethnographic concerns, not losing sight of OTers' aims. Likewise, I will tackle the overlapping domains of the ontological and the real tackle by both OTers and Graeber. Lastly, I will focus on the political agenda that is aroused by these issues.

Bifurcations

Ethnography began with the analysis of the diverse communicative situations of non-Western cultural groups (family clans, indigenous tribes, people with still very traditional cultural characteristics, among others) but gradually shifted to the communicative situations of large modern cities, which have been authentic transcultural spaces since the 1960s. Furthermore, some anthropologists have taken up militant ethnography (Corsín Jiménez & Estalella, 2013; Graeber, 2013b; Leyva Solano & Speed, 2015; Postill 2016; etc.): a different approach to qualitative research that is deliberately politicised, enabling researchers to engage directly with radical associations, guerrilla urban artists, feminist-activist scholars, affinity groups, or social movements. Ethnographic events, such as Tahrir Square, 15M or Occupy Wall Street, provided great opportunities for putting experimental forms of organising political life into effect with participants unfamiliar with democratic history, little previous knowledge of this way of working and no overt desire to adopt certain political labels as part of their self-identity. David Graeber (2004), who moved freely between on-the-ground activism and the academic world, stressed new possibilities for ethnography:

The practice of ethnography provides at least something of a model, if a very rough, incipient model, of how non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice might work. When one carries out an ethnography, one observes what people do, and then tries to tease out the hidden symbolic, moral, or pragmatic logics that underlie their actions; one tries to get at the way people's habits and actions makes sense in ways that they are not themselves completely aware of. One obvious role for a radical intellectual is to do precisely that: to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts. (pp. 11-12)

As a non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice, ethnography seems far from those proponents who see anthropology as comparative metaphysics or even metaphysics as comparative ethnography (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 7). In contrast, David Graeber viewed his ethnographic work through a pragmatic activism lens, meaning that he tried to unravel assumed structures and cast light into conceptual disjunctures to get some sense of actions which are efficacious in the world: 'Like any ethnographer, I wish to tease out the tacit underlying principles of action. What are the effective rules of engagement, then, that form the basis of this calculation, and how are they worked out?' (Graeber, 2009, p. 428). This kind of ethnographic fieldwork moves forward traditional approaches that arose from within the discipline, such as the ethnography of communication, linguistic anthropology, or interactional sociolinguistics (Hymes, 1974; Gumperz, 1982; Duranti, 1994; Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Madison, 2018). Tellingly, Graeber's suggested itinerary purposely avoids categories of knowledge, metaphysical concepts or Western theories and imageries: if one is to depict accurately the dynamic and creative worlds of others, she or he has to, rather than introduce hermeneutical patterns and theoretical structures upon subjects and objects analysed, let her- or himself go and try to generate conceptual homonymities between different worlds. 'By attempting to establish an equivalence between two "nonsensical" words, one necessarily ends up having to use one's own imagination, inventing terms and concepts, inaugurating new connections from old verbal categories' (da Col & Graeber, 2011, p. 8). On the contrary, in the attempt to impose stranger-concepts and correspondences of meaning alien to people own social actions, weight is given to privileged Western theoretical schemes rather than relying on insights derived from the same place as the ethnographic data. As Tony Crook and Justin Shaffner stressed, this is 'not to deploy ethnographic content to illustrate forms of academic creativity as an end in itself', but rather an attempt to develop the revelatory capacities of alien forms as a means to describe how local creativi-

ties 'differently exploit what, for talk's sake, could be said to be the (con)fusion between form and content' (Crook & Shaffner in Wagner, 2011, p. 160).

The point thus is to elicit developing methods for radical critical engagement with and understanding of different cosmologies, cultural worldviews or social processes. This, by all means, challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act. From David Graeber's point of view, ethnographic writing is 'an attempt to describe, and to capture something of the texture and richness and underlying sense of a way of being and doing that could not otherwise be captured in writing' (2009, pp. 14–15). Accordingly, ethnographic research aims to create a narrative of social practices in peripheral suburban settlements or far afield islands, or, to put it bluntly, to have access to spaces inhabited by unusual singularities, social multiplicities and conceptual ambiguities that pose a challenge to researchers. Why exactly? Because those *remote* areas open up new possibilities of what da Col and Graeber (2011), following Marylin Strathern (2011), called bifurcations: conceptual relations and term connections forged through divergence that produce a binary divide between the choice of direction and other potential options. In dealing with such a vast array of new actions, concepts, and realities, the ethnographer must at least address this unsettling question: can others' culture be revealed from the point of view of the people who live there? Or, to put it this way—is the ethnographer able to find equivalences between the observer's world and the world of the observed, being aware of the incommensurability between cultures, languages, or human beings? As once Edmund Leach schematically stressed on his ethnographic work in Burma, the problem 'is not simply one of sorting out Kachins from Shans; there is also the difficulty of sorting out Kachins from one another' (1970, p. 3).

Additionally, and although ethnographers are aware that meaning is co-created through complex processes grounded on what is present, sometimes it is hard to imagine what is absent. Roy Wagner has drawn attention to the unspoken, the unheard or the unknown (2010). Of particular concern here is that ethnographers not only represent subjects, procedures or rituals of a certain culture but also have an approach to the nonexistent, the exclusions, the incommensurable. Probably, some of these questions led Graeber to focus on the underlying structures, patterns or models in his anthropological fieldwork and drove him to pay attention to the disjunctive homonymies between different modes of thought. As da Col and Graeber (2011) observed,

> … bifurcations appear everywhere in ethnographic theorisation, by working out distinctions, contradictions and caesuras between what we think of as nature and

culture, us and them, the human and the non-human, the immanent and the transcendent, the religious and the economic, the moral and the material. (p. 7)

These ethnographic binarisms force the researcher to pay attention not on the way the observed subjects know or interpret *the world* (which is an epistemological concern) but rather to inquire what world one is trying to describe or talk about (which is an ontological one). As Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) stressed, 'all ethnographic descriptions, like all cultural translations, necessarily involve a certain element of transformation or even disfiguration' (p. 291). The tipping point thus relies not on *how* the world is but *what* things constitute the *disfigured* perspectives and positions from the world observed. In this sense, one has to move forward from ethnographic accounts to the ontological realm of conceptualisation.

Turnarounds

Graeber proposes a hypercritical model of ethnographic theory that focuses not on how the "others" think within an externally imposed ontological horizon but rather how the others can inform anthropologists something unexpected about humans everywhere (2015). In this regard, concepts such as value, performance, magic, belief, science, and similar, should be reassessed in order to avoid the naturalisation of arbitrary ideologies and to reflect critically upon reality. In contrast to Graeber, Viveiros de Castro (2015) holds that ontological questions come into being 'only in the context of friction and divergence between concepts, practices and experiences within or without culturally individuated collectives, *given*, I stress the polysemic value of this word, given the absolute absence of any exterior and superior arbiter' (p. 8). If it is by no means difficult to support Viveiros' understanding of the frictional feature of concepts, it is tantamount to baffling to share the closed homogeneity he imposes to concepts that arose from the alterity to which he points. The impossible interchangeability of concepts do not lead necessarily to a conception of ontology labelled as 'philosophical war machine' (2015, p. 9): conceptual friction is about ethnographic nuances not about the irreconcilable antagonism between different forms of life: the concepts' the others organise the world, and the language they use to communicate, as well as their cultural practices and values.

Furthermore, Viveiros de Castro (2015) also stated a parallel between ontology and nature: 'if ontology were to be 'just another word for' anything, I would suggest it should have been *nature*, a term the grammatical pluralisation of which provoked the same uneasiness as that of "ontology"' (p. 9). Giving nature an ontological status may be inappropriate, precisely by reinforcing rather than describing the explicit point of view

of Western ontology once the image of legality is projected onto it; when the concept of nature undergoes the reflexes of legality, it becomes anthropomorphic, metaphysic, loaded with alien categories and concepts that, primarily, rest on an idealised world-view. At some point, to say *nature* may have been just another word for *ontology* is a mistranslation, and it reminds me of the phenomenologist from Louvain-la-Neuve character in Anne Carson's *Canicula di Anna* (1984):

> [H]e warns
>
> of a mistranslation (read "essence"
>
> for "nature"). (§ 11)

To posit nature as an alternative term to ontology means to subject whose nature we do not know to something manageable, safe, regular. If nature comes to mean anything, it is precisely an endless and unfathomable thing, not a real entity jointly operated in its development and evolution by conceptual cause-effect order.

David Graeber's uneasiness on the philosophical Idealism of OT proponents points precisely to the adoption of 'a tacit ontology which seems indistinguishable from classical philosophical Idealism' (2015, p. 21). Hegel is, by all means, the key referent here. By assuming the speculative unity of the opposites (finite/infinite, being/ thinking, object/subject, etc.) as the dialectical structure of the Absolute, Hegel disregards the finite, the concrete, the object, which cannot enjoy autonomous activity as such: reality itself is a form of thought that, in the process of its own determination, gives rise to concepts: what is real is the realisation of its concept. Concepts, indeed, being thought-objects themselves, are real and, based on their dynamic principles of world-constitution, they do realise themselves (Hegel, 1979). Setting aside metaphysical-related questions, Viveiros de Castro, quoting Holbraad and his collaborators in *Thinking through things* (2015), stated in the same Hegelian spirit that 'concepts-as-representations were preempted by the 'duplex' circuit of concepts-as-things (endowed with material efficaciousness) and things-as-concepts (endowed with thinking capabilities)' (p. 5). Moreover, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell emphasised in the aforementioned essay (2006) that 'concepts can bring about things because concepts and things just are one and the same' (p. 13). To assume such a theoretical position fuels the indictment of idealism, and it is highly problematic, especially in anthropological terms: reality is not everything that can be grasped through concepts. In fact, what happens is quite the opposite: we grasp just a tiny portion of the elements that reality is made of, particularly because the defining qualities of reality cannot be completely known. I, therefore, consider Graeber's

point sensible when asserting that, if ethnographic research is carried out,'even a very good one, captures at best two percent of what's actually going on in any particular Nuer feud or Balinese cockfight' (2009, p. 519). To assume idealist goals, furthermore, poses an even greater question: if concepts determine reality, which is ensured by the tautological unity between concepts and reality, what concepts anthropologists can draw from their toolboxes in order to describe what it is?

David Graeber echoed similar concerns about the so-called epistemic fallacy, namely, the 'tendency to confuse the question of how we can know things with the question of whether those things exist' (2001, p. 51). This very much slippery slope was brought to light by Roy Bhaskar: the epistemic fallacy 'consists in the view that statements about being can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge; i.e. that ontological questions can always be transposed into epistemological terms' (2008, p. 27). To analyse being in terms of knowledge is baffling. The problem is, of course, with the rephrasing of ontological questions as epistemological ones: according to Graeber, OTers shifted from the ontological order (the discourse of being as such) to the epistemological order (the possibility of knowledge). In regard to the epistemic fallacy, consider Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's point in a paper co-signed by Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen: 'the anthropology *of* ontology is anthropology *as* ontology; not the comparison *of* ontologies, but comparison *as* ontology' (Holbraad et al., 2014). Comparison means nothing but to notice the similarities and differences between two or more things and, to some extent, to know such constitutive differences. So, if one understands comparison *as* ontology, one assumes knowledge to be at the very basis of ontology, and thus, the anthropology of ontology becomes the question of how can the informer know the others rather than how could she or he give 'full expression to the contingencies of a given ethnographic situation' (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 68). Graeber's argument (2015) is:

> … the question 'does the world exist?' has come to be treated as indistinguishable from 'how can I prove the world exists?' or even 'is it possible for me to have definitive knowledge of this world?' But this implies a false premise: that if a world did exist, it would therefore be possible to have absolute or comprehensive knowledge of it. There is simply no reason to assume one follows from the other. (p. 24)

In an attempt to neutralise the danger of the ethnographer's presuppositions, interpretations, or even descriptions, Holbraad and Pedersen develop a more differentiated approach, since they posed that the ontological turn in anthropology should be considered

a strictly methodological proposal. Stated concisely, the distinctive feature of the more fully outlined OT version draws attention to the conditions to freeing thought from all philosophical intervention and metaphysical foundationalism:

> The epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is* to be seen in the first place. Accordingly, what ultimately tints the anthropologist's glasses are not social, cultural, political or other presuppositions, but ontological ones, by which we mean basic commitments and assumptions about *what things are, and what they could be* (including things like society, culture, politics and power). Here, longstanding epistemological worries about ethnocentrism, solipsism, essentialism, orientalism and so forth are reconceived as ontological problems: How do I, as an anthropologist, neutralise or otherwise hold at abeyance or in continuous suspension my assumptions about what the world is, and what could be in it, in order to allow for what is in my ethnography to present itself as what it is, and thus allow for the possibility that what is there may be different from what I may have imagined? … Hence the flagship term, "ontological", indicates the need to shift anthropological concern onto questions about what kinds of things might exist, and how. (Holbraad & Pederson, 2017, p. 5–6).

I believe it is worth paying attention to what Holbraad and Pedersen considered the most distinctive feature of their ontological turn's proposal and should be emphasised their efforts to avoid accusations of idealism, essentialism and so forth. OTers attempt to avoid metaphysical foundations and philosophical intervention, but certainly our Western world is utterly conditioned (if not defined) by such a conceptual framework.

Here I would like to analyse two questions posed by Holbraad and Pedersen: i) the assumptions about *what things are, and what they could be*; and ii) the need to shift anthropological concern onto questions about what kinds of things might exist, and how. Let me take the last of these first. It seems to be beyond doubt that reality is structured in different degrees, and as Graeber stressed, there is nothing wrong in recognising that 'we can never know completely; which will never be entirely encompassed in our theoretical descriptions' (Graeber, 2015, p. 24). If one cannot come up with absolute proof of the existence of what is real, how exactly is it possible to describe "existence" itself? The very verb "exist" was coined in the medieval schools of theology precisely to justify the "realest", the *ens realissimum*, namely, God. Indeed, the Latin verb *exsistit*, which was originally used with the meanings of *arises*, *appears* or *results*, came to take on the function of exists in the medieval schools to name God. And it is true that scholastic theology

undoubtedly relied on the Greek verb *hyparchei* when coined the verb *to exist*, which the ancient philosophers used with the value of *it is available*, *there is in reserve*, *it is at hand* and other quasi-auxiliary values that are neither syntactically nor semantically empty and which from the end of the 2nd century CE took on the value of 'what is in fact' as opposed to 'is mere appearance' (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math*. 8. 85). Existence or *hyparchei*, therefore, paves the way for the function *there is* that medieval theology applied to God but in its archaic sense pointed to the value westerners could *appropriate* or *take from* when they need to do so. It is not by chance that Graeber saw value as the gear lever that brings universes into being (2013a).

The attempt to answer the first question, that is, what things are or could be, is still far more complex. Firstly, the advocates of the ontological turn talk about *being* or, as it is preferred recently, *becoming* (Holbraad et al., 2019), although no thorough explanation of either terms is given (becoming is just the happening of events, the very *being* or existence of events). At any rate, the point here is to shed light on the copula *is*, which in itself has no meaning: most of the world's languages have no copula: it is an *accident* of the Indo-European languages. These languages have developed a copula (is), which properly came to be confused with a verb with meaning (to be), giving rise to highly labyrinthine situations. However, most languages studied by anthropologists do not have that copula: for most societies known to anthropology, native people simply make predications; they put the subject they are going to talk about, *house*, and then add whatever they want to say about it (black: black house). Moreover, the house *is* black, stays black in itself, and that is how languages work, and the copula does not even appear. Nevertheless, it is indeed distinctive of this family of languages (also in part of the Semitic languages, Hebrew and Arabic, but especially Indo-European) that the bulk of these formulations has come to acquire a certain body and has therefore given rise to all sorts of confusions, of semanticisations.

Secondly, to give an account of what things are or could be leads to formulating ontological problems tackled from different perspectives, from scepticism to quantum mechanics, from anthropology to phenomenology. Indeed, there are plentiful occurrences. Mostly, they have a rather general meaning, for instance, *it seems*, *it feels*, *this is how I feel about it*, *so it seems to me*, *it appears*, *so it appears to us*, and so on. In other contexts, these "things" are defined as arguments; thus, certain properties of arguments or of attitudes towards arguments are said to appear in certain ways. Quite often, things occur according to which one would normally expect something to be, that is, instead of *is*. Something is said to appear or appear a certain manner, in contrast to saying that it is a cer-

tain manner. Therefore, what things appear, feel, or seem may be of very different kinds. All this makes me think not only of the Holbraad and Pedersen quote, that is, 'how do I, as an anthropologist, neutralise or otherwise hold at abeyance or in continuous suspension my assumptions about what the world is,' but in Pedersen's claim: 'OT can be understood as an extreme form of heuristic "bracketing" in the Husserlian sense' (2020, p. 633). To suspend judgment upon both the external world and the internal states of introspection—would doing so not nullify empirical ethnographic data? To overcome extreme sceptical positions (the necessity to suspend judgement in relation to any concept, form of life, proposition, etc., claiming to say, show or describe something about how things really are), one must creatively mediate the connections between two or more different entities in order to prompt novel meanings and conventional decision criteria. The same statement is suggested by Holbraad and Pedersen when they argued that 'It is correct to say that the ontological turn 'turns', precisely, on transmuting ethnographic exposures reflexively into forms of conceptual creativity and experimentation' (2017, p. 296). In the end, creativity is not an aspect of the objects at all: it is a 'dimension of action', as once Graeber put it (2007, p. 136).

However things stand, OTers attempt to keep Western authority structures safe: 'the ontological turn, in other words, protects our "science" and our "common sense" as much as it protects the 'native' (Alberti et al., 2011, p. 903), it is nothing but a breaking point to David Graeber.[2] OTers' arguments stand for different ontologies, but Euro-American ontology is backed up only by Western science. In this sense, Graeber pointed out that the ontological turn seems to be inviting ethnographers to set aside the entire project of philosophy: 'science, in contrast, would be preserved, but as the special property of "Westerners" or "Euro-Americans"' (2015, p. 21). Ethnographic reassessment of ontology led, in the end, to political questions that must be tackled to deepen the understanding of and stimulate ideas on the imposition of categories into others.

Tricks

As studied by ethnographers, anthropologists, or whoever tries to depict basic modalities of small-scale societies, reality can never be completely unveiled: if something is

_____

[2] The still contentious debate between OTers approaches and other anthropologists concerns is one of the most vivid in ethnographic research. I find of particular interest the reflections of Marina Simić when noticed that OTers political and theoretical claims have not had many followers in Eastern Europe. As Simić emphasized, 'the ontological turn brings radical alterity, pertinent to the "real anthropological others", which at the same time confirms the difference between colonial (or in other ways superior) selves and the researched others' (2018, p. 66). I believe it is worth paying close attention to the "ontological turn" outline and the critiques raised by scholars as Simić, but not only hers (see for instance Ramos, 2012; Bartolomé, 2014; Bessire & Bond, 2014; Hage, 2014; Ruiz Serna & del Cairo, 2016, etc.).

real, any ontological description will unavoidably be limited and partial. Still, the main and rather peculiar effect of the ontological narrative in ethnography has been to export categories to anthropology that apparently allow the redescription of human beings in the light of alterity. This has a political impact indeed, since politics is about relations between people, and the introduction of ontological categories into the anthropological field is tantamount to imposing certain values, concepts, or schemes (by no means naïve) upon projects of human action. Contrary to the anthropological concerns of the OTers, Graeber suggested an anti-ontological agenda in order to analyse social worlds as a project of mutual creation collectively made and remade. Why? What exactly does he reject from OTers when he sets out different ways of thinking about reality?

First, Graeber found it inappropriate to give ontology the power once given to culture: 'This strikes me as unfortunate, because it implies that questions about the ultimate nature of reality actually matter to most people; in actual practice, what seems striking is the degree to which they do not' (2013a, p. 229). People act as if the world they inhabit is true, valid or correct, but do not question the ultimate structure of reality, the nature of being or the basic building blocks reality is made of. As it happens when playing certain games (either competitive or cooperative, or neither competitive nor cooperative, like children sliding down a railing or going down a slide) humans act according to the as-if quality. The same is valid when following the story: the fictionality characters or the impossibility of deeds do not matter. What is at stake is to follow the story as if actually were be true.

Second, Graeber stressed the problematic feature of this narrative when applied to political situations. 'Suddenly,' he argued, 'we move from willing suspension of disbelief, to something very much like an ideological naturalisation effect' (2013a, p. 230). What if people act according to arbitrary social arrangements based on political ruling class cosmologies? They will simply accept those values considered worthy of pursuing without questioning the reality as such. In this scenario, likewise, to open up insurrectionary, critical or discussion spaces to encourage and support social changes will be difficult to achieve: if political leaders were concerned about promoting social change, they would accept the incompleteness of reality and the lack of absolute truths, rather than the other way around.

Finally, Graeber asked about the reasons that some cosmologies have a playful as-if quality and, in contrast, others make powerful truth-claims:

> The more competing arenas there are, in contrast, the more likely that at least some of them will begin making much more ambitious claims, to personal com-

mitment (faith) or to actually representing the ultimate truth or meaning of existence. (2013a, p. 232)

This is a key point: ontological claims, that is, the necessary premises underlying different cosmologies and alleged to derive from some metaphysical source, are primarily political moves. In what sense are they political? If some people have the power to make claims over what is real and what is not and can convince others to accept such claims, the right of eminent domain claimed by those who hold power cannot be questioned, and thus their claims become political axioms: unquestioned, incontrovertible… *real*. Indeed, politically dominant people pretend their statements are more real than the other ones or that they have special powers over reality, as in the case of certain magical practices, in revealed religions or even in science. This tendency to fetishise a kind of stable and hierarchical reality thus has a clear political dimension: it points to the misappropriation of what is considered to be real as a means to achieve authority or gain power over people.

Graeber used a chess metaphor to note the shift from ontological issues to political ones: 'the ontological gambit' (2013a, p. 232). It may be worthwhile to remember that in chess, the gambit is an opening that consists of sacrificing a pawn, another piece or even both to achieve a favourable position. Meaning, thus, an opening move meant to gain advantage through a trick (as if running in an athletics track, someone trips somebody's leg up), referred to ontology points to the direction mentioned above: the introduction of strategies that seem to come from outside the very system in order to gain power. Alternatively, as underlined by Marshall Sahlins, 'the question that remains … is also the question of why the material goods of the highest value (variously described as monies, valuables, prestige goods, treasures, wealth, or riches) originate in "the cosmological outside"' (2013, p. 180). The clue, therefore, is the maintenance of social order, the imposition of organisational political forms, the enforcement of state-apparatus values or the introduction of bureaucratic hierarchies from some dimension of the cosmological outside.

The ontological gambit is more than a mere suspicion but no less than a balance of political possibilities. It is also a plot, which sets out to begin creating the means to subvert egalitarian political structures, such as those studied by Jane Fajans on the Baining of Papua New Guinea, whose people were labelled, incidentally, as 'egalitarian anarchists' (Fajans, 1997, p. 281). The reference to anarchism is timely and relevant enough to warrant a change in the above arguments: in *heuristic* egalitarian societies (no society is entirely egalitarian) an enormous amount of work is placed on maintaining

communal consensus and creating political relations from within, not outside, community itself. In these societies, there is no *arche*; that is to say, there are no caste-based social structures whose power rests upon external rule. Their procedures for coming to collective decisions are thus *an-archic*, ruler-less, and the order comes in the absence of powerful authority. The anarchism introduced here is largely what Graeber (2001) and others (e.g., Grubacic & Graeber, 2004; Kuhn, 2009; Vodovnik, 2013; Bray, 2018; etc.) refer to as "small-a" anarchism, focused on the prefigurative micropolitics of daily practice such as following anti-hierarchical decision-making practice in their daily activities and seeking immediate (albeit partial) solutions, rather than in prioritising sweeping social change. "Capital-A" anarchists, by contrast, are more consciously part of the anarchist tradition and more overtly geared towards developing large-scale anarchist organisations operating along anti-hierarchical, democratic principles to facilitate and foreshadow significant structural change. The differences between these two tendencies are overplayed. Small-a anarchists are inspired by revolutionary change and capital-A anarchists engage in immediate direct action; the differences are largely ones of emphasis, overt appeal to the tradition and the use of *anarchist* as a label or self-description (Ordóñez et al., 2018).

The link between small-a anarchism and Graeber's anti-ontological agenda could be supported using experience drawn from ethnography but also activism, mutual aid projects, revolutionary constituencies, prefigurative commitment to embodying goals in one's methods, and so on. As Graeber himself highlighted, 'anarchism is already, and has always been, one of the main bases for human interaction'(2004, p. 76). Thus, to experiment with other political logics has to do with promoting different ways of human interaction, especially around issues of social justice and against policies of submission and dispossession. The jury is out on to what extent these two perspectives (i.e., small-a anarchism and Graeber's anti-ontological agenda) could be satisfactorily deployed.

References

Alberti, B., Fowles, S., Holbraad, M., Marshall, Y., & Witmore, C. (2011). "Worlds otherwise" archaeology, anthropology, and ontological difference. *Current Anthropology*, *52*(6), 896-912. doi: https://doi.org/10.1086/662027

Bartolomé, M. (2015). El regreso de la barbarie. Una crítica etnográfica a las ontologías "premodernas". *Trace. Travaux et recherches dans les Amériques du Centre*, (67), 121-149.

Bessire, L., & Bond, D. (2014). Ontological anthropology and the deferral of critique. *American ethnologist*, *41*(3), 440-456. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12083

Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of science*. Routledge.

Blommaert, J., & Dong, J. (2010). Ethnographic fieldwork. A beginner's guide. Multilingual Matters.

Bray, M. (2018). Horizontalism. In B. Franks, N. Jun & L. Williams (Eds.). *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach* (pp. 99-114). Routledge.

Carson, A. et al. (1984). Canicula Di Anna. In T. Weiss & R. Weiss (Eds.). *QRL Contemporary poetry series* (pp. 4-39). QRL.

Corsín Jiménez, A., & Estalella, A. (2013). The atmospheric person: Value, experiment, and "making neighbors" in Madrid's popular assemblies. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *3*(2), 119-139. doi: https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.008

Da Col, G., & Graeber, D. (2011). Foreword: The return of ethnographic theory. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *1*(1), vi-xxxv. doi: https://doi.org/10.14318/hau1.1.001

Duranti, A. (1994). *From grammar to politics: Linguistic anthropology in a Samoan village*. University of California Press.

Fajans, J. (1997). *They make themselves: Work and play among the Baining of Papua New Guinea*. The University of Chicago Press.

Goldman, M. (2009). An Afro-Brazilian theory of the creative process: an essay in anthropological symmetrization. *Social Analysis*, 53(2), 108-129. doi: https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2009.530207

Graeber, D. (2001). *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams*. Palgrave.

Graeber, D. (2004). *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Graeber, D. (2007). *Possibilities: Essays on hierarchy, rebellion and desire*. AK Press.

Graeber, D. (2009). *Direct action: An ethnography*. AK press.

Graeber, D. (2013a). It is value that brings universes into being. *HAU: Journal of ethnographic Theory*, *3*(2), 219-243. doi: https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.012

Graeber, D. (2013b). *The democracy project: A history, a crisis, a movement*. Spiegel & Grau.

Graeber, D. (2015). Radical alterity is just another way of saying "reality" a reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *5*(2), 1-41. doi: https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.2.003

Grubacic, A., & Graeber, D. (2004). Anarchism, or the revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century. *The Anarchist Library*, *1*(6).

Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge University Press.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1979). *Wissenschaft der Logik, Werke 6*. Suhrkamp.

Hage, G. (2014, January 6). Critical anthropology as a permanent state of first contact. *Cultural Anthropology Online*. http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/473-critical-anthropology-as-a-permanent-state-of-first-contact

Henare, A., Holbraad, M., & Wastell, S. (Eds.). (2007). *Thinking through things: theorising artefacts ethnographically*. Routledge.

Holbraad, M., Pedersen, M. A., & De Castro, E. V. (2014, January 13). The politics of ontology: Anthropological positions. *Cultural Anthropology*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions

Holbraad, M., & Pedersen, M. A. (2017). *The ontological turn: an anthropological exposition*. Cambridge University Press.

Holbraad, M., Kapferer, B., & Sauma, J. F. (2019). *Ruptures: Anthropologies of discontinuity in times of turmoil*. UCL Press.

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Tavistock Publications.

Kuhn, G. (2009). Anarchism, postmodernity, and poststructuralism. In R. Amster, A. de León, L. A. Fernandez, A. J. Nocella II & D. Shannon (Eds.). *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* (pp. 34-41). Routledge.

Leach, E. R. (1970). *Political systems of highland Burma: a study of Kachin social structure*. The Thlone Press.

Solano, L. X., & Speed, S. (2008). Hacia la investigación descolonizada: nuestra experiencia de co-labor. In X. Leyva Solano, A. Burguete & S. Speed (Eds.). *Prácticas otras de conocimiento(s). Entre crisis, entre guerras I*. Cooperativa Editorial Retos.

Madison, D. S. (2018). *Performed ethnography and communication: Improvisation and embodied experience*. Routledge.

Ordóñez, V., Feenstra, R. A., & Franks, B. (2018). Spanish anarchist engagements in electoralism: from street to party politics. *Social Movement Studies*, *17*(1), 85-98. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1381593

Pedersen, M. A. (2020). Anthropological Epochés: Phenomenology and the ontological turn. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *50*(6), 610-646. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393120917969

Postill, J. (2017). Remote ethnography: studying culture from afar. In L. Hjorth, H. Horst, A. Galloway & G. Bell (Eds.). *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography* (pp. 87-95). Routledge.

Ramos, A. R. (2012). The politics of perspectivism. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *41*, 481-494. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145950

Ruiz Serna, D., & Del Cairo, C. (2016). Los debates del giro ontológico en torno al naturalismo moderno. *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, (55), 193-204. doi: https://doi.org/10.7440/res55.2016.13

Sahlins, M. (2013). On the culture of material value and the cosmography of riches. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *3*(2), 161-195. doi: https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.010

Simić, M. (2018). (Not) turning in the widening gyre: The (im)possibility of the ontological turn in Eastern Europe. *Anthropological Notebooks*, *24*(2), 61-73

Strathern, M. (2011). Binary license. *Common Knowledge*, *17*(1), 87-103. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-2010-040

De Castro, E. V. (2015). Who is afraid of the ontological wolf?: Some comments on an ongoing anthropological debate. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, *33*(1), 2-17. doi: https://doi.org/10.3167/ca.2015.330102

Vodovnik, Ž. (2013). *A living spirit of revolt: The infrapolitics of anarchism*. PM Press.

Wagner, R. (2010). *Coyote anthropology*. University of Nebraska Press.

Wagner, R. (2011). The chess of kinship and the kinship of chess. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *1*(1), 165-177. doi: https://doi.org/10.14318/hau1.1.006

Povzetek

V tem kratkem eseju se bom lotil nedavnih antropoloških razprav med OTerji (zagovorniki ontološkega preobrata v antropologiji) in argumentov Davida Graeberja glede ontologije, politike in etnografske teorije. Natančneje, poskušal bo kritično razkriti težnjo po fetišizaciji neke stabilne in hierarhične realnosti, da bi bolje razumel tako imenovano radikalno drugačnost drugih. Ta ontološki okvir je neke vrste idealno področje, razvito v kontekstu konkurenčnih trditev o tem, kar je resnično. Vendar se pri tem postavlja preprosto vprašanje: kako bi lahko skupina antropologov, ki se očitno ukvarjajo izključno z etnografskimi vidiki plemena, klana ali družbe, ponudila osnovo za ontološki program? Namesto tega predlagam, da Graeberjeva dela ozaveščajo o izkušnjah in učinkih tega ideološkega okvira. Nato se obrnem na teoretične prispevke moje študije kot načina, da pokažem, da Graeber skuša razvezati vozel kulturnih in ideoloških predsodkov. Kakorkoli že, Graeber ponuja antiontološko agendo, saj med drugim razkriva zavestno ali nezavedno predpostavljene politične kozmologije, ki prispevajo k podrejenju in razlastitvi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: David Graeber, etnografija, ontologija, politika, antropologija

CORRESPONDENCE: VICENTE ORDÓÑEZ, Filosofía y Filosofía Moral y Política, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Senda del Rey 5, 28040 Madrid, Spain. E-mail: vordonez@fsof.uned.es