

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0019

Charles Herrman  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2093-3428>  
cherrman@gmail.com

## David Graeber: Purity, Alienation and Dignity

### Abstract:

David Graeber wrote about debt, jobs and the negative effects of globalization. He was an American anthropologist, anarchist activist, and was an author known for his books *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, *The Utopia of Rules* and *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. A professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics, he passed away 2 September 2020, at age 59.

### Keywords:

honor-based, dignity-based, honor, dignity, jokesterism, private property, hierarchy, alienation

Back in 2007 David Graeber wrote a paper entitled “Manners, Deference, and Private Property: or, Elements for a General Theory of Hierarchy.”<sup>1</sup> This effort, in honor of his work, tries to take his article further, with my own conclusions that are intended to lend support to his approach. These conclusions are supported by theoretical work I have done on honor-based (H-B) and dignity-based (D-B) societies over the past few decades. Let me introduce them as follows: Honor-based societies associate honor with *respect*, with *merit-based* worth, and with *trustworthiness*. Dignity-based societies, on the other hand, treat dignity as entailing *inherent worth* giving rise to inherent rights predicated upon *acceptance* of this worth and upon *faith* that such acceptance merits credence. *Everyone’s* worth is accepted on faith, and faith also implies giving the benefit of the doubt wherever possible.

---

1) I thank Jim Casey for making the paper available. Back in 2011 Graeber played an instrumental role in the Occupy Wall Street movement. It was in this connection that I met him while he was in Austin, Texas, on a book tour, where we agreed that honor-based and dignity-based societies were germane as references by which to critique modern society.

For example, as a basic rule (that circumstances only occasionally overturn) immigrants are not turned away just because they have not proven themselves trustworthy by some criterion. They are accepted on faith because they are fellow human beings with legitimate reasons for wishing to become American citizens.

The D-B approach is for the most part “modern”<sup>2</sup> whereas the H-B represents traditional society as well as a majority of modernity – roughly 85% worth, though many societies are in a transitional state, gradually accepting the newer views on dignity. Both cultural types have their views on dignity; we Westerners assume it speaks to our ideals, including inherent worth and human rights. In fact, while this is true, it is also the case that these ideals have not borne the expected fruits. Using Graeber’s article as a counterweight, we may come to better appreciate why a realistic view of dignity is essential to our efforts in attaining the ideals currently beyond reach.

Graeber reminds us that the advent of modern dignity left much to be desired, and his voice should remind us that we have work to do. He advocates a dignity that recalls the advantages of the older honor-based habits of mind. These habits are engendered in a consideration of the avoidance and jokester phenomena of traditional societies; the topics of the article I wish to examine here. It will be discovered that the answer lies in accepting both sets of dignity together, with each cultural type respecting one another’s traits, including the cross-adoption of some of them.

## I

“I wish to return to what I take to be the Grand Tradition,” Graeber writes. “Most of all, I want to show that tradition has an almost infinite capacity to generate new political perspectives – perspectives that are, at their best, radical in the sense of delving to the very roots of forms of power and domination.”<sup>3</sup> His object here is to demonstrate that, like nature, history relies on tried and true methodologies. As Norbert Elias put it, “History has its continuity: wittingly or not, those coming later start with what already exists and develop it further.”<sup>4</sup> In particular, Graeber is interested to show us that two widespread phenomena seen by anthropologists actually have a long history, one that has helped – and is continuing to help – to shape modern politics, government and morals.<sup>5</sup>

He wishes to illustrate in particular that “what seemed most alien was not actually all that alien at all: that something very much like joking and avoidance relations exist in middle-class households in Europe. It strikes me that the logic of joking and avoidance actually provides a very useful means to begin to create both a rudimentary theory of manners, and a rudimentary theory of hierarchy” (MDP, 14, 15). This article examines five examples reflecting the jokester and his/her relation to hierarchy; three are offered by Graeber himself, the other two I have added by way of extending his thoughts.

During early modern times, Graeber finds that “many of the popular struggles between Puritan and Royalist factions in the years before the English revolution turned precisely on struggles over attacks on the

---

2) I say “for the most part” because “modern” society as I use the word refers to the Enlightenment period and later. England, however, began its dignity-based leanings back with the Magna Carta, and progressed with the development of Parliament and centralized legal administration under Henry II. In addition, Rome was nominally dignity-based, again primarily because of its legal systems indicating personal rights as well as the *jus gentium* precept which would ultimately imply recognition of human dignity across the board.

3) Graeber, “Manners, Deference, and Private Property: or, Elements for a General Theory of Hierarchy,” 16. Hereafter referenced in text parenthetically as MDP along with page number. See also Graeber, “Manners, Deference and Private Property in Early Modern Europe,” 694–728.

4) Elias, *Power and Civility*, 84.

5) The two features mentioned are joking relationships and avoidance rules. Some authors assert that jokesterism exists in the modern workplace. See Handelman and Kapferer, “Forms of Joking Activity: A Comparative Approach,” 484–517.

place of festivals in popular life” (MDP, 14). What sort of festivals could cause such problems? Carnivals. They are everywhere established to celebrate dignity in pleasure, to reverse status roles, and to be a sign that the well-to-do who join in are willing to bring themselves to the lower levels, thus respecting the latter’s dignity. But “for the loftiest,” Graeber writes, “Carnival was an indulgence for the masses, a chance for them to play the fool and give vent to their base and sinful natures. Opposition to Puritanism followed the same dual nature as Carnival itself: the same combination of joking aggression and idealistic utopias” (MDP, 29, 44).

The matter of Carnivals was a matter of manners. So Puritanism sponsored alienation in others against a society of “manners.” Alienation in the present context originates not only when certain practices of one other group induce alienation in another, as for example in the attempt to enforce manners, but also, and most especially, where people who are “strangers” to one another under taboo arrangements desire, unsuccessfully, to maintain open and official ties. *Who* was alienated by manners – or anything else – will be discussed anon.

Again, Puritans were on a campaign, a “reformation of manners.” Norbert Elias, whom Graeber often cites in his paper, tells us (in Graeber’s paraphrase) that from the sixteenth century onward there was an increasingly strict suppression of “any public acknowledgment of bodily functions, excretion, aggressiveness, death, decay – in fact, any or all of those things which are typically thought to be embarrassing or shameful within relations of avoidance” (MDP, 13). In short, there was as little sympathy for the Carnival celebrations as for the jokester’s ambit. Graeber continues: “One hears also of joking partners privileged to throw excrement at one another, or even wax-tipped spears. What goes on between joking partners is not simply humor; it is humor of a very particular kind, one which might justifiably be called ‘shameless’” (MDP, 17).

Shameless, I would say, in the sense of “impure” – at least in the mind of the Puritans. Some avoidance taboos make it impossible to do what is otherwise necessary – to make and secure beneficial contact – and jokers make light of the fact. Impurity, alienation and dignity are words I have used in order to highlight Graeber’s positions. Graeber himself uses purity to make a general point, namely, that it is associated with hierarchy; he does not mention alienation but frequently describes it; and he often seems indubitably to imply dignity, whence the title of this piece.

## II

Joking relationships exist among the Comanche, Arapaho, Navajos, Apache, Crow, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Winnebago, Ojibwa and Blackfoot to name just a few from North America. They are also found in New Guinea, Nepal and Australia, Melanesia, Amazonia, Siberia, Andaman Islands, and elsewhere. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown was one of the first to inform us that the “joking” relationship:

Can be regarded as a kind of friendliness expressed by a show of hostility. The mutual abusive behavior would be simple hostility in other connections, but the joking relatives, ruled by convention, and the friendliness is exhibited in the readiness not to take offence but to respond in the same way. The social separation of the man and his wife’s relatives is symbolically represented in the sham hostility, ruled by convention, and the friendliness is exhibited in the readiness not to take offense.<sup>6</sup>

---

6) Radcliffe-Brown, “Introduction,” in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, 57. See also his *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, 90–116.

Marriage across clan or tribal lines means that there is a psychology of what I will call the “stranger predicament”: your wife’s people continue to have her under their protection, as it were, and you are treated somewhat as a stranger, an outsider, one to whom decency is easily compromised. To avert troubles one can simply stay aloof and go nowhere near the relatives. Taboos convert this option into an avoidance rule. Or, one can find a way to operate more openly, as a jokester. The extreme reticence to speak and touch exists in what can be called honor-based (H-B) societies. Such taboos ensure not only the avoidance relation but hierarchy into the bargain. Joking relationships allow for the requisite personal contact without denying the context of separateness, and thus averts the worst of the stranger predicament.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropologist Robert Lowie, examining avoidance and joking in several societies concluded the matter with a rule: Joking implies that *licensed familiarity generally obtains between potential mates*. In so doing he left wide open the curious fact that these elements of licensed familiarity occur in the context of strong avoidance taboos.<sup>8</sup> Much has been made of the fact that avoidance and joking are found together; that there must be some cause-effect relation between them.

So while maintaining contact across clan or tribal lines *is* the whole rationale, the respect shown to elders or to special kin relations have their own reasons (and taboos) that have nothing to do with joking. Where difficult respect relations loom large, they would taboo whatever was necessary in order to avoid dangerous kin relations. By the same token, where taboos exist between the relatives of *the same* clan or moiety – but of *different lineages* – certain of their kin are considered “joking relatives.”<sup>9</sup> The tendency to exercise taboos whenever a tribe wishes to avert any kind of significant problem is part of the H-B connection.

The kind of hierarchy that carries the mark of avoidance and ritual distancing is epitomized in an anecdote by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss while travelling in India.

I stopped the chauffeur-driven car ... in front of a respectable-looking shop ... and was about to enter it. The driver looked at me with horror: How can you sit there? What indeed would have been the effect on his prestige among his own people, if the master [Herr anthropologist] had lost caste, and at the same time had made him [the driver] lose caste, by sitting down side by side with members of his race?<sup>10</sup>

Undue familiarity with the powerful of a different caste broke the avoidance taboo in a major way. Apart from power relations, however:

One often hears of injunctions against seeing the other eat, touching her bed, behaving violently in her presence, making reference to excretion in casual conversation, and so forth. Emphases vary, but the general direction of such prohibitions remain surprisingly uniform throughout the world. At the same time, one hears again and again of joking partners privileged to make off with each other’s possessions, and this sort of license is considered of a piece with all the others. (MDP, 17, 19)

In the H-B world the avoidance taboos include as much ado over “manners” as they do with assuring due respect to those entitled to it.

---

7) Hoebel, *Man in the Primitive World*, 247.

8) Lowie, *Primitive Society*, 101–107.

9) Emmons, *The Tlingit Indians*, 28–29. Clans are based upon a common ancestor and can have several lineages.

10) Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 138.

But where contact is considered necessary, joking is the best option. The only native association between the avoidance and joking is that they so often coexist in an H-B society. Orit Kamir has written widely on the nature of honor and dignity in the social context, specializing in legal theory and film studies. If I may be forgiven a long excerpt:

Whereas, for most members of honor cultures, honor is earned and maintained through careful, painful observance of a specific cultural code, many define dignity as an essential human quality obtained at birth. All persons are worthy of human dignity and/or possess it merely by being humans, it requires no action. Honor cultures are thus duty-based, whereas cultures based on human dignity are rights-oriented.

Honor entails variable status and virtue for the few honorable persons of high social rank; dignity entails invariable, fundamental virtue for all human beings. Whereas a person's honor can easily be lost through the slightest social error, or stolen by another, many would argue that one cannot lose or be deprived of his or her human dignity under any circumstances. One may attack another's dignity, but can never destroy – or even tarnish it. The right to dignity thus entails a prohibition on any attempt to destroy or undermine a person's dignity – although such an attempt is inherently impossible.

Honor encourages rivalry, antagonism and sometimes aggression, whereas dignity fosters consideration and constraint. Honor, (like a commodity, a valuable possession, a trophy), can be accumulated; dignity is often portrayed as the most essential human asset, which cannot be quantified or accumulated. An honor culture, therefore, offers higher stakes and higher risks, whereas dignity secures a fundamental minimum. In this sense, whereas honor promotes ambition, dignity inspires a “minimalist” social code. Honor implies “live and let die,” whereas dignity implies “live and let live.”<sup>11</sup>

In a nutshell, let us say that there are honor-based societies, and then there are the “true believer” honor-based societies. Kamir refers mainly to these latter, whom anthropologists call “honor cultures,” and who appear to raise their kids to demand respect of one another. Some of their languages have so many variations on the word “respect” you might say they constitute a “respect language.”<sup>12</sup> These are the groups that go the furthest to maintain taboos that result in avoidance relations along with hierarchical organization. (At that time the most common Amerindian taboo was against speaking with mother-in-laws.)<sup>13</sup> Joking alters what would have been an unavoidable avoidance taboo. This is the other part of the H-B connection.

Under the usual H-B conventions, if I calmly accept your digs, I am not only not respecting you; in fact, I would be disrespecting myself. I would be compromising my H-B *dignity*. Only one thing permits us to exchange barbs in jest, and that is the demonstration of respect for one another's dignity. That such dignity

---

11) Kamir, “Honor and Dignity in the Film *Unforgiven*: Implications for Sociolegal Theory,” 193–232. The excerpt is at 203–204. For those readers already familiar with Ruth Benedict's shame-guilt typology, Kamir tells us that “The binary definition of honor and dignity is structurally analogous to the honor-guilt one.” (197, n. 8.). She might as well have said “shame-guilt” but then honor and shame have been strongly linked in anthropological circles.

12) The idea of a “respect language” occurred to me while reading John Caughey's work with the Fáánakkar people of Micronesia, whose language teemed with references to respect. Notable also is the presence of innumerable avoidance taboos, all predicated upon respect. I saw no evidence of joking relationships, though Caughey may have neglected to mention them, as did many other anthropologists. See Caughey, *Fáánakkar Cultural Values in a Micronesian Society*. See especially chap. 3.

13) Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, 666 (s. v. Taboo).

can indeed weather a storm is demonstrated by the willing acceptance of “unnatural familiarity” – the joking relationship. It is not a case of barren respect. Dignity is the backbone of respect, while honor is the face, the manifesting reflection of respect. If you want conditions of equal and matched *respect*, go to the bazaar and watch the haggling.<sup>14</sup> Honor-based societies rely on mutual respect. Joking elevates this. Warriors throwing epithets and blunted spears and using the roughest language conceivable are not acting as regular good ol’ guys of the neighborhood. These antics preserve comity between tribes, especially those where there is a good deal of cross marriage, as Graeber notes.

### III

“I also believe,” he continues, “a theory of manners opens the possibility of understanding how forms of social domination come to be experienced in the most intimate possible ways – in physical habits, instincts of desire or revulsion” (MDP, 16). In violating avoidance rules – “manners” – the behavior of joking partners was nothing less than “shameless.” But note that true dignity cannot lose standing simply because of temporary inversions of cultural competence in the service of an ideal, even if unobtainable. Carnival participation not only does not violate dignity, it is intended to be a measure of the durability of true dignity.<sup>15</sup> The same logic applies to the joking relationship.

Graeber next asserts that with avoidance of the person goes the avoidance of the property associated with this person, based on a form of contagion in which sacrality flows through the person into his or her possessions, including real estate. What is more, “the greater the purview of any given representative, the more inclusive the group he was seen to represent, the more he himself was set apart from everyone else, including other members of his own clan or lineage.”<sup>16</sup> With power (the more people below you, the more power you possess) and with sacred property comes the H-B avoidance system associated with political hierarchies. Sacrality, purity and avoidance taboos are a substantial part of hierarchy as Graeber is picturing it.

And, interestingly, should it happen in an H-B network that a lower person successfully violates avoidance rules and engages a superior, “anything that did touch his person was as it were drawn into the charmed circle of his sanctity.” Having touched the property of a sacred person, dignity was equalized in a manner of speaking. In many instances, however, the results are not so happy.<sup>17</sup> And it is up to the respected person to defend his or her dignity, just as it is up to the householder to protect their possessions from theft. These are typical H-B precepts.

As for comparisons between today’s social classes, the small upper class (perhaps the upper five percent give or take) is self-consciously “refined” and reserved, with affected charm; the bourgeois-like (sharing materialistic values or conventional attitudes, but above all, land-owning) middle class is divided into moieties; the

---

14) An experienced haggler says, “Don’t try to be the victor. Instead, find a way for everyone to win. Price is rarely the final deciding factor in a negotiation. *Good haggling actually builds respect between two people rather than diminishes it* [my stress].” Tervooren, “How to Haggle Like Your Old Man.”

15) “Since the beginnings, the carnival has been the space of inclusion. Throughout the party, it is not easy to distinguish social hierarchies. We are all the same. The party consists of a two-day parade – a fascinating procession on earth. There, is the identity what is essential. The sense of being Brazilian is dignified.” See *South American Jets*, “Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, the Biggest Celebration in the World.”

16) *Ibid.*, 27.

17) Sir James Frazer records this: “His magical virtue is in the strictest sense of the word contagious: his divinity is a fire, which, under proper restraints, confers endless blessings, but, if rashly touched or allowed to break bonds, burns and destroys what it touches.” Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 203.

liberals, who are substantially D-B, and the conservatives where we find substantial H-B leanings with a good deal of parochialism. Either type is more or less refined, less “hoity-toity” and generally self-conscious, out for success.<sup>18</sup> The lower class is more broadly H-B. By no means are they hoity-toity but rather more spontaneous, free-spirited and sincerely charming. Any attempted discrimination apart from this kind of generality is, I think, by nature invidious, usually unfair to the lower class, which is often described as “coarse.”

And as Graeber is certain that “most people seem to consider it a matter of course that upper and lower stratum of society should differ in this way ... or at least, that they should be represented so” (MDP, 16), so also is he content to liken the Medieval upper class to “a gang of heavily armed thugs extorting protection from a population of helpless farmers” (MDP, 16). Perhaps he could take it as a metaphor applicable to modern societies. In the period Graeber is considering, what Elias says of the highest class applies also to the lowest: “Anything that touches their embarrassment-threshold smells bourgeois ... and inversely: anything bourgeois touches their embarrassment-threshold. It is the necessity to distinguish themselves from anything bourgeois.”<sup>19</sup> The Puritans/bourgeoisie had it coming from above and below. Alienation was rife.

Elias notes the competition exerted from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries between nobility, Church, princes, and bourgeoisie. He notes, first, that the princes assumed autocratic power; I add that in later centuries the bourgeoisie apparently ape the higher class and, representing the Puritan element, attempt to enforce on the lower class (as well as their own) the etiquette fostered by courtiers serving the highest ranks. It seems invariable that the highest ranking group will separate itself hierarchically with avoidance rules,<sup>20</sup> especially from those wanting the same advantages. Ultimately this did not work to the advantage of the hierarchy, for the “new manners” program actually took over the entire realm, just as the rights of noblemen became the rights of all alike in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such transitions are aback the transition from H-B to D-B thinking.

Meanwhile, however, Graeber cites Bakhtin to the effect that the Carnival character “pervaded popular culture, setting the tone for everything from charivaris to folk tales, miracle-plays, and the spiels of itinerant quacks and medicine-peddlers, or the remarkably intricate idiom of obscenity and verbal abuse typical of the Medieval market place” (MDP, 28). This Carnival issue, in which inverting moral systems is reminiscent of jokers inverting the H-B moral code, suggests to Graeber the historical continuity spoken of above. Again citing Bakhtin, Graeber agrees that the uncrowning of the Carnival King suggests an attack on hierarchy itself. “If one rejects the principle of avoidance altogether, if nothing is set apart or sacred, hierarchy cannot exist” (MDP, 30).

The sixteenth and seventeenth century English carnivals harken back to the Roman Saturnalia. Tesi di Laurea writes,

In Roman times the most important festival was the *Saturnalia* during the winter solstice, whose most significant element was the inversion of hierarchy: conventional social relations were turned upside down, slaves became masters and vice-versa, people wore masks, money was distributed to poor people, freedom of speech was granted to everyone and banquets and shows took place; every moral restraint was removed. This custom was called Saturnalian because its intent was to be a transitory imitation of the “Golden Age” the ancient society ruled by the God Saturn, and described as a society of peace, fertility and common wealth, where slavery did not exist.<sup>21</sup>

---

18) See Larrabee, *The Self-Conscious Society*.

19) Elias, *Power and Civility*, 301.

20) Including sumptuary laws protecting the clothing rights of the upper class over and against the lower classes. The famous Cardinal Wolsey was responsible for some of these in the sixteenth century.

21) di Laurea, “Carnival and Puritanism in Falstaff.”

IV

“One thing the ethnographic evidence makes abundantly clear,” writes Graeber, “is that, when relationships between two people, or two groups, are defined primarily around exchange (and not, say, by idioms of common substance), they have a strong tendency to also be marked by rules of avoidance” (MDP, 32). *This seemingly innocent pronouncement is the inchoate evidence of the gradual change from honor-based to dignity-based society.* When the traits of a higher class come to be adopted by other classes, Graeber says that this process is one of “abstraction.” The market exchange system is related to abstraction and, as Graeber points out, leads to avoidance rules. While Graeber is unclear in explaining this, it is likely to involve the fact of ownership of the means of trade, an individual ownership against all in common. In a fundamental way I believe Graeber is saying that this separates individuals away from the older convention of using property in common. This is precisely the link to the D-B ideology predicated upon dignity’s insistence of the clear autonomy of the individual.

Graeber also considers that, “It was the existence of money – an abstract system by which the value of just about any piece of property could be compared – that made all persons comparable as well. In contexts involving exchange, persons were defined by what they had; since money made all property at least potentially equivalent, then people were as well” (MDP, 34). The intended conclusion: the example of abstraction noted here presupposes the widespread acceptance of dignity – of *dignity-based* dignity, not the old H-B dignity retained in the jokester relationship. Graeber seems to be saying that *this* historical movement was *not* entirely wise in all regards. We are here asked to take a hint: our ideals are beyond our present means. We are not the be-all and end-all given our present lackluster approach to dignity.

On the other hand, the right to give and receive independent of hierarchy or avoidance rules is what distributes the *honor-based* dignity far and wide. Jokesterism is part and parcel of this. The *kula* trade of Melanesia, first observed by Bronislaw Malinowski, is another example. It is also (to many authorities) part of the gifting concept of Marcel Mauss.<sup>22</sup> But when people are equalized because of their participation in *market exchanges*, it shows that anyone can, through purchase, exercise a general freedom as if it were a franchise of sorts. And again, this is part of what distributes *dignity-based* dignity to one and all. Market exchanges are no longer honor-based communal relationships of gifting. They imply precepts of ownership largely (though not entirely) alien to the H-B mindset.<sup>23</sup>

Because market exchanges now reflect how dignity is perceived, perhaps in addition they have introduced an element of avoidance in order to protect D-B dignity; and this avoidance, where markets are the rule of the land, implies what Graeber has elsewhere noted, namely, that avoidance can itself become an abstract constant throughout a society. Indeed: once *land* could be freely exchanged in the market system, what was a taboo against all (my “right” of ownership) *is* for the wealthy, and *becomes* for all others, a recognition of implicit dignity. The process began, of course, with the wealthy, but the greater fact is that it spread throughout society over the centuries.

The result was, in twelfth and thirteenth century England, the enclosure period which with various other issues gave rise to profound alienation. Graeber cites approvingly historian C. B. MacPherson’s notion that “exclusive private property had become so broadly accepted among ordinary English people that popular politicians could invoke it as the basis for making claims of natural rights and political liberties” (MDP, 35). *In*

---

22) For Malinowski, see his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*; for Mauss see *The Gift*.

23) Chattels, only occasionally land, and certain titles might be exchanged, bought or sold or inherited. I will mention just three of countless examples: Emmons, *The Tlingit Indians*, 46–47; Hoebel, *Man in the Primitive World*, chap. 24; Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, 39–44. While common control of land is the generality, the exceptions are as numerous as they are important.



*short, rights now implied D-B dignity.* However-much the wording is awful, the premise is unmistakable: property and the individualism it helped to sponsor were now written in stone. Modern dignity was established, warts and all. Graeber wants us to be more mindful of these warts.

Rights, noted Graeber, granted the prerogative of privacy from power: “Even the king could not trespass on this right. This was perhaps the first political evocation of the principle that (as Goffman put it) the human person was *sacred*” (MDP, 36). Such sacrality is precisely why modern dignity is “inviolable.” Indeed, McPherson suggested that this process resulted in modern “individualism.” It fell in perfectly with dignity’s need for autonomy. Graeber, in substantial agreement, notes in addition that “in so far as projects of reform were successful, it was largely because the market and commercial logic was increasingly setting the terms of social life among all classes of people” (MDP, 37). By the same token, what the people were losing was the life they had once known, the life and (honor-based) dignity of a *community*. Dignity was no longer the H-B variation. Each system had its advantages and weaknesses. This new sort of dignity was not always reflective of the ideal concept we all see dignity as representing. Meanwhile, the H-B concept of dignity was retained in the jokester relationship.

In addition to anti-Puritan reaction and the Carnival as a medium of its expression, Graeber’s third example, this one from the High Middle Ages onward, became conventional, especially in England, namely, to send children off to some form of “service” where they would learn manners and a trade. Throughout the period, children and adolescents were expected to be unruly; in fact, they were a sustained Carnival. In being carted out of the house to other persons, this seemed to create a form of exclusion and a mode of avoidance rules, to which youth responded with revelry and some rebellion. The wariness of Puritan methods grew stronger still, and turned a healthy segment of the populace against them. Perhaps it is no surprise that many of the Puritans turned to the American colonies.

Opposition to the Puritans:

Seems to have been largely based on the ethos long implicit in the very popular festivities and rituals which had now been thrown so starkly into question. As a result, opposition to Puritanism followed the same dual nature as Carnival itself: the same combination of joking aggression and idealistic utopias. Like Carnivals on the Continent, they came to commemorate a golden age when, it was imagined, equality and physical happiness were not yet things of the past. Festivals were times for merry-making; once, all England had been merry. (MDP, 44)

## V

In the last section of his paper, Graeber summarizes the overall argument. “I began by distinguishing two ways of defining the human person, either as a collection of substances intrinsically continuous with the world and with others [H-B], or as a collection of abstract properties set apart from it [D-B].” (MDP, 45) To the Puritan mentality the first applies what one might see, from an anthropological view, as the “rule of purity.”<sup>24</sup> Pollution is the opposite of purity, and, like the “contagion” of sacrality beyond its source, so also with impurity and pollution. In most cultures human excrement and fluids are associated with the animals and with messy nature. They are above all things impure. Graeber cites Bakhtin referring to this as being the “grotesque.” Joking almost parodies this matter of purity, throwing taboos against impurity out the window. The other is the avoidance feature, which not only sets whole classes of people apart from one respected class, but also separates individuals. This, I think, is how Graeber would see matters in modern America.

---

24) See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

Speaking of which: “Puritan opinions on this subject – that the problem of poverty had nothing to do with real wages, but was really rooted in the poor’s own lack of morality and self-control, their unwillingness to create proper families – have an uncanny resemblance to those employed by American conservatives today” (MDP, 47). One might add that the conservative religious railing against the liberal dragon bespeak the methods of Puritanical musings and the hierarchical methodology of exclusion. In this case it oftentimes takes the form of seclusion. The sterner sort do not want to exist in a sinful environment. They despise public schools.<sup>25</sup> Many live in gated communities or rural areas.<sup>26</sup>

As I have pointed out, the jokester is implicitly warned in advance and on principle to mind the dignity of the adversary. He does this by an artistically conceived and acted array of invectives or licentiousness. The jokester: 1) wants a beneficial arrangement, 2) employs impurity, 3) may act out of seeming (actual or potential) alienation, and 4) supports mutuality of dignity. Of his three examples, Carnival-goers could involve, according to the historical period, participants from all classes of society. For those in the Carnival, there was indeed impurity, and plenty of it. There was a mutual balancing of dignity among and between the classes. There was an alienation from the status quo, which held men and women in an unnatural state. One harkened back to a better day. One presumes that most wanted society but on more acceptable terms. Of the three, the Carnival is the closest to the criteria.

Graeber can argue, correctly, that there are jokesters in every period who help to frame the issues and apply pressure for reform. Everywhere they are in part alienated, and in part willing to practice impurity to make their point. Everywhere they argue against hierarchy. In most cases the endpoint was, according to Graeber, ambiguous: in the end, “an earlier, hierarchical view assumed that people’s identities (their properties, if you will) were defined by their place in society [H-B]; the assumption was now that who one was – was based on what one had, rather than the other way around [D-B]” (MDP, 36). If the former was problematic, the latter had substantial issues as well. Henry Sumner Maine once quipped, “the movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement *from Status to Contract*.”<sup>27</sup> In traditional society status was associated with offices in which authority amounted to the command of respect (not the brute exercise of power). Ask the Chinese or Japanese what they have long thought of contracts – as presuming a trust not yet in evidence. The dignity-based took to contracts with full faith and acceptance.

## VI

Of my two examples the first is the famous potlatch ceremony known to us primarily by the Northwest Pacific Coast tribes. Tribal chiefs battle it out by alternately giving away wealth (in the form of blankets and “coppers”). The purpose is to obtain reaffirmations of amicable relations between neighboring tribes and/or secure the rank of successors upon the death of the predecessor.<sup>28</sup> In this example it is the H-B dignity of the players that is at stake, as well as their own peoples – not merely the respect. As elsewhere, the alienation stems from the “stranger predicament.” Were there no way for jokesters to maintain open lines to mutual benefit, alienation

---

25) Boston, “In Case You Had Forgotten, The Religious Right Still Hates Public Schools.”

26) Desilver, “How the most Ideologically Polarized Americans Live Different Lives.”

27) Maine, *Ancient Law*, 165. Italics in original.

28) “There are three general characteristics of potlatch-type societies. On is the presence of a rank system ... in the political power to control other individuals. The second characteristic is the presence of ceremonies at death or at other times when large-scale distributions take place which serve to validate positions of rank. The third characteristic is that one always potlatches to one’s affines [relatives by marriage].” See Rubel and Rosman, “Potlatch and Hakari,” 660–73, 660.

might well be the result. In the more important potlatches potential conflict is either between lineages (or clans) or some other tribe. Shaming the visiting clan or tribe is *de rigueur*. Let us presume it can devolve into impure, shameless language.

“As in alliances, the exchanges may set groups off as rivals to one another as well as create bonds between groups. In all societies where potlatching occurs, rank is intrinsically important, and presence of rank is a constant.”<sup>29</sup> Joking need not be a two-way exchange, potlatch or no; but the notable potlatches in particular are usually one-way, the host chief giving to the visiting faction. It is expected this faction will potlatch to the present hosts at some time in the future, and it is expected that the amount given will exceed the last, which upholds the chief’s prestige and rank *vis-à-vis* the first.

One is tempted to ask whether the bourgeoisie market economy (including the stock market) is analogous to a hierarchy. Does it include those over which it exercises power, or exclude groups? Does it sponsor avoidance rules? As an “economy” the answer is yes; but as a mere mechanism for the exchange of goods, no, not any of these tell-tale things – at least not directly. In form it is a neutral mechanism – one that is also easily manipulated to the disadvantage of consumers.<sup>30</sup> In the Great Depression the wealthiest of the country created a boom that went bust. And what about these people in the top classes of society? The answers are now all yes. Their power is, aside from market effects, in lobbying; its *inclusion* coming from the masses affected by their actions (take 2008 as an example). *Exclusion* is suggested by discrimination against minorities in hiring, institutional racism generally, and voter suppression in particular. Where there are avoidance rules they are set by those in control, those who determine the prevailing culture (especially in companies); discrimination secures the *hierarchy* by this cultural practice – as Graeber defines it (though not every scholar requires both inclusion and exclusion in a hierarchy).

We can coin a specialized term for the individuals comprising this group of power-brokers. It is the *cult of dignity*.<sup>31</sup> In England the cult may have originated with the environment out of which the enclosure movement arose, reaching a crescendo a few centuries later. It was then, as it has usually been, a tool of the wealthy and/or powerful. As a cult, its ideals are a sliver taken from culture at large, rarified and protected. They shout equity and equality from the rooftops but betray these ideals daily. The only dignity is their own dignity. They expect favors and favor influencing others with their money or cowing them with their power. Given that lobbyist monies pay for the reelection of incumbents, Congress is in hock to wealth and has itself become a hierarchy, creating rules of avoidance that the public cannot easily bridge even by use of the franchise. Gun law legislation failed to pass despite polls consistently showing public support at 90% for expanded background checks.<sup>32</sup> These are the expected results of the cult.

As a clique of the “extremely successful,” they are in a position to do what it takes to reap the advantages their policies have effectuated via lobbying or campaign donations. The public has been listening, and is increasingly uncomfortable. Protesters are looking more and more like jokesters, most of whom tolerate the system (some not so much) but demand that it operate equitably. They feel alienated, a population underserved politically (a near majority of youth are unimpressed with capitalism).<sup>33</sup> Some are alienated by rules constraining minorities to an excluded state, as mentioned above. Their language or actions are occasionally provocative.

---

29) Rosman and Rubel, “The Potlatch,” 658–71, 659.

30) See Thaler, *Misbehaving*.

31) See Herrman, “The Cult of Dignity,” 1–15.

32) Kertscher, “Do 90% of Americans Support Background Checks for All Gun Sales?”

33) “In 2018, Gallup found that 51 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Americans view socialism favorably; only 45 percent look at capitalism positively. An August 2018 YouGov poll revealed that only 30 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds had good feelings toward capitalism, while 35 percent regarded socialism positively.” Glaeser, “How to Talk to Millennials About Capitalism.”

In addition, the well-placed have made unions irrelevant for the most part, curtailing the ability of unions to raise money for Democratic candidates. What has not been renounced is the principle of union equality, sometimes termed “steward’s immunity,” which is still recognized by the courts (who knows but that Trump tried to overturn this). The Fifth Circuit said the NLRA [National Labor Relations Act] protects “against discipline for *impulsive and perhaps insubordinate behavior* that occurs during grievance meetings, for such meetings require a free and frank exchange of views.”<sup>34</sup> From a certain vantage, the steward certainly looks the part of a jokester. Workplaces generate alienation over unsuccessful attempts to obtain pay and benefits. So-called “right-to-work” states have what are in effect avoidance rules. Unions permit and facilitate jokesterism, which together with the foregoing make this a fifth group reflecting the influence of the jokester, at least when remonstrating. I believe Graeber would agree.

## VII

It looks like this presentation revolves around the meaning of dignity. True enough. The modern dilemma among those who take dignity to be the source of inherent worth and of rights, is that we have not made the kind of world that true dignity would represent. In point of actual fact, many traditional societies have arrived at something far closer to true dignity. If anyone goes hungry it is because all are; the elderly are by and large well cared for; all have adequate housing and health (as they understand it); everyone has employment, privately or publicly and those who do not simply are not capable – but are nonetheless in good standing despite the intense work ethic so widespread throughout traditional society. What ultimately marks the distinction between the two groups is that the H-B have an association of values reflecting practicality (social discord is at all events to be avoided), whereas the D-B have lofty principles as their rationale, principles we are a long-ways away from putting into sufficiently widespread practice.

Let us recall that Graeber was an anthropologist who saw the truth of these remarks first-hand. And what, then, constitutes this so-called honor-based dignity? For most traditional societies it boils down to freedom, individuality, and success. It is more than mere curiosity that all three are common between the ideal honor-based *and* nominally dignity-based societies (such as our own, where religious and legal standards are intended to support the ideals of dignity). The difference comes about in some of the theoretical details used to define the two types of society.

This theoretical distinction is my own, and I take responsibility for the conclusions drawn. As I mentioned above, the H-B society values first of all respect, then trustworthiness, and thirdly worth in merit – the first being taken for granted as grounding the other two. It is generally happier and by and large more carefree and certainly more communal than its D-B equivalent. The D-B groups value the inherent worth with rights as the most relevant, followed by *acceptance* of this dictum on *faith*. With acceptance and faith this variation stresses granting the benefit of the doubt (e.g., innocent until proven guilty) and a sincere tolerance of all kinds and types of good people. At present we are more serious and theoretical than they, but less practical. We are more tolerant (at our best) but not nearly so happy, for lack of ever being sufficiently satisfied.

Our sense of freedom is not the H-B one. They consider freedom as a particular subset of our freedom. Theirs is the freedom from submission to foreign entities. France is named for the Franks, a name meaning “freedom.” Our freedom frequently requires others to display unwanted restraint. Hate speech is allowed and respected. Powerful businesses think nothing of stifling competition. *Citizens United* permits money to represent free speech. The list goes on.

---

34) Schwartz, “The Special Status of Union Stewards.” My emphasis.

Their individualism is not our individualism. Theirs' implies that a person is free to be himself or herself, to fulfill one's potential in the context of society's norms. We think individuality means that *and*, in addition, extending our desires to the very limits that define our rights. We tend to push the envelope, as it were, a bad policy enunciated as long ago as ancient Rome by Pliny the Younger. This tendency is responsible, along with globalism, for the now gigantic corporations and still more limited free enterprise competition. Our sense of success is measured in wealth; the H-B conception of success is related to one's social or community roles being well executed. It is a measure of respectability. In a true D-B society, success would translate to actual happiness as a measure of achieving true dignity as a norm.

We already possess the written exemplars of idealized dignity. The lesson for now is to take them seriously and apply them as intended, not as the powerful do, but as our adages demand: that we be a nation of laws, not of men, and so on. Less acknowledged, but still more to the point: dismantle the system of influence in electioneering. Let lobbyists' monies support a nationally paid election process that does not by today's definitions of equity permit advantages to the incumbents, and perks to the favored powers who presently fund both the incumbents and those outside who are willing to be hypocrites in order to play the game.

Graeber said a lot of things, many that I could agree with and some I could not. The point is that he spoke his mind and had reasons for wanting strong change. He was right that sacrality, purity and avoidance rules make for hierarchy and that the jokesters survive to this day doing much the same thing as in their traditional roles. Graeber gets the last word:

We are already anarchists, or at least we act like anarchists, every time we come to understandings with one another that would not require physical threats as a means of enforcement. We have little idea what sort of organizations, or for that matter, technologies, would emerge if free people were unfettered to use their imagination to actually solve collective problems rather than to make them worse.<sup>35</sup>

---

35) In Sanneh, "Paint Bombs: David Graeber's 'The Democracy Project' and the Anarchist Revival."

Bibliography:

- Boston, Rob. "In Case You Had Forgotten, The Religious Right Still Hates Public Schools." *Wall of Separation Blog*, 30 Nov., 2018. <https://www.au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/in-case-you-had-forgotten-the-religious-right-still-hates-public-schools>.
- Caughey, John L. *Fáánakkar Cultural Values in a Micronesian Society*. Philadelphia: Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 1977.
- Desilver, Drew. "How the Most Ideologically Polarized Americans Live Different Lives." *Pew Research*, 13 June, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/13/big-houses-art-museums-and-in-laws-how-the-most-ideologically-polarized-americans-live-different-lives/>.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Elias, Nobert. *Power and Civility*, vol. 2. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- Frazer, Sir James. *The Golden Bough*. Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions, Inc., 1993.
- Glaeser, Edward L. "How to Talk to Millennials About Capitalism." *City Journal*, Spring 2019. <https://www.city-journal.org/millennials-embrace-socialism>.
- Graeber, David. "Manners, Deference, and Private Property: or, Elements for a General Theory of Hierarchy." In *Possibilities: Hierarchy Rebellion and Desire*, 13–56. Oakland: AK Press, 2007.
- Handelman, Don and Bruce Kapferer. "Forms of Joking Activity: A Comparative Approach." *American Anthropologist* (New Series) 74, no. 3 (June 1972): 484–517. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1972.74.3.02a00180>.
- Herrman, Charles. "The Cult of Dignity." *English Linguistics Research* 6, no. 2 (2017): 1–15. <http://www.sciedupress.com/journal/index.php/elr/article/view/11335/7005>. <https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v6n2p1>.
- Hodge, Frederick Webb, ed. *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, vol.2. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975.
- Hoebel, E. Adamson. *Man in the Primitive World*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1949.
- Kamir, Orit. "Honor and Dignity in the Film *Unforgiven*: Implications for Sociolegal Theory." *Law & Society Review* 40, no. 1 (March 2006): 193–232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5893.2006.00263.x>.
- Kertscher, Tom. "Do 90% of Americans Support Background Checks for all Gun Sales?" *Politifact* (Poynter Institute), Oct. 3, 2017. <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2017/oct/03/chris-abele/do-90-americans-support-background-checks-all-gun-/>.
- Larrabee, Eric. *The Self-Conscious Society*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*. Translated by John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Penguin Books, 1973.
- Lowie, Robert H. *Primitive Society*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961.
- Maine, Henry Sumner. *Ancient Law*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1970.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1922.
- . *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1959.

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1990.

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. "Introduction" in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, edited by Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde, 1–85. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.

—. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1952.

Rosman, Abraham and Paula G. Rubel. "The Potlatch: A Structural Analysis." *American Anthropologist* (New Series) 74, no. 3 (June 1972): 658–71. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1972.74.3.02a00280>.

Rubel, Paula G. and Abraham Rosman. "Potlatch and Hakari: An Analysis of Maori Society in Terms of the Potlatch Model." *Man* (new series) 6, no. 4 (Dec. 1971): 660–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2799189>.

Sanneh, Kelefa. "Paint Bombs: David Graeber's 'The Democracy Project' and the Anarchist Revival." *The New Yorker*, 13 May, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/13/paint-bombs>.

Schwartz, Robert M. "The Special Status of Union Stewards." *labornotes.org*. 13 April, 2018. <https://www.labornotes.org/2018/04/special-status-union-stewards>.

*South American Jets*. "Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, the Biggest Celebration in the World." <https://southjets.com/en/carnival-in-rio-de-janeiro-the-biggest-party-in-the-world/>.

Tervooren, Tyler. "How to Haggle Like Your Old Man." *Money & Career, Personal Finance*. Sept. 8, 2020. <https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/how-to-haggle-like-your-old-man/>.