

### 3 Debt

#### The Price of What, Exactly?

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According to David Graeber, in Sumerian, *amargi* means “released from debt” or, more literally, “return to the mother”: slaves, once their debts had been cancelled, could go back to their families (Graeber, 2011). This shows that debt is an anthropological phenomenon that has been largely overlooked, eclipsed by the gift that, especially because the advent of Marcel Mauss’s well-known theory, occupies far more space in speculative thinking. Yet from time immemorial, debt has held an important place in relationships between people. How did this come about? Debt must be the price of something. But of what? Currently debt is presented in the guise of the public debt of poorly managed, irresponsible governments (e.g. today in Greece or Spain) that, presumed to spend more than they receive from their citizens, have run up debts on financial markets, which are seen as the ultimate judges of right and wrong. Financial markets, however, are also in disgrace, perceived as large-scale fraudsters and tax evaders, suspect in the universe of good governance where transparent accounting is an essential norm. Public currency is no longer seen as a political means of bringing about social and economic change. It no longer even really belongs to the State, but to a global entity named the Market, in this case Financial.

Such is the terminal phase in the decline of the Nation-State, ushered in by several decades of a neoliberal offensive driven by tenacious hostility to the State—an ideology that harks back to the Far West and its population of “white trash.” Today in 2015, the State is seen less as an emancipator than as an oppressor, its positive character weakened by the failure of 20th-century socialist experiments and by disillusionment with social democracy (represented, e.g., by the Socialist Party in France). Brightness is fading out of the future, and governing now boils down to management of a mixed bag of risks (one of them environmental): a mere *governance* bereft of any real political intent. The State is now little more than a corporation that is somewhat larger than the others, even though it still has ambitions of something more (although not much more) than merely to balance its accounts. This situation has drastically weakened belief in the *res publica*, which has increasingly become the subject of wishful thinking and pious incantation rather than the object of a refoundation. It has also underscored

the current status of the citizen, now thought of first and foremost as a consumer, a mere economic agent (Hours, 2012). This crisis of State sovereignty has produced an emotional fallout—branded as “populist”—that is easy to understand. Such is the backdrop of the theatre in which we propose to examine the nature of debt.

First we will look at debt as the price paid for domination, underscoring its impact in terms of power grabbing and the control of dependents subjected to debt and even alienated by it. Here enslavement for debt is the central paradigm: the progressive loss of freedom, of mobility, and eventually of the ownership of one’s own self—the culmination of subjection in all historical societies.

Next we will look at the obverse of this: debt as the price of freedom. Cancellation of debt serves as the foundation of many social dynamics. It is the essential or primordial form of the gift, which is rarely gratuitous—an aspect missed by the current idealistic vulgate. The meaning of the gift lies in its reactivation of exchanges between people, exchange being economic and social: embedded, as Polanyi showed.

This makes it easier to understand in the current context—that of a market economy in the throes of financial delirium, with deregulation, an escalation of philanthropic initiatives, experiments and discourse on the economics of solidarity, and constant cant encouraging worried citizen-consumers of ethical goods to be generous despite their worrying over the precariousness of their status and their jobs. These appeals constitute a release and a discharge in all the senses of these terms. They are virtually omnipresent in social science today, giving us glimpses of new spaces: a world that is “alternative”: the obverse of the alienation that is part of daily experience—a breach, or at least the glimpse of a possible exit.

In the third part of this chapter, the quest for “anthropological fundamentals” will take us back to cargo cult studies made in the 1970s in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides), a Franco-British condominium then in the throes of decolonisation. A study of Nagriamel, a messianic land-claim movement typical of Melanesian cargo cults, will enable us to raise the question of the invention of debt: in Melanesian society, the cycles of exchange do not admit of debt, as the existence of debt would disrupt the cycles of exchange on which the society is based.

## DEBT AS THE PRICE OF DOMINATION

In traditional drawing-room drama, people who are deeply in debt have to beware of the bailiff; one’s “household goods” can be “attached.” All sorts of goods, from used refrigerators and Ferraris to works of art and real estate, can be auctioned off by order of the court. Today, indebtedness as a result of nonpayment or of nonrepayment (in the case of loans) necessarily presupposes a way of measuring what is due: money provides this.

Historically, debt is certainly an older institution than money. Today, however, debt is measured exclusively in monetary terms—even when the debt is symbolic: the debts settled on the analyst's couch also lead to payments in money that compensate the analyst for his or her time and, in so doing, liberate the patient.

Over and above its multiple and essential ambiguities, debt today is characterised by its hypertrophied financial dimension that in the current period of crisis has grown at the expense of the symbolic significance of indebtedness (e.g. that of children to their parents). Family solidarity is no longer able to make up for the growing precariousness of life in Africa or even in Europe. In Spain, young people who are unemployed still live at their parents' home; but when the time comes to take charge of the parents when they get old, what will the offspring do? What we sense here is the deadweight of debt in terms of dependency, in the distribution of power and of domination. These three dimensions strengthen one another in a bind. In symbolic domination, the figure of God emerges, as do the figures of the family and of parents, all of which represent powers. The power of God sets up ritual constraints. For the more zealous believers, it leads to subjection of one sort or another. This is true of all major religions and in particular of Christianity and Islam, both of which stress the debt of the sinner to his Creator, codifying the sinner's practices and limiting his or her capacity to initiate and ability to take liberties.

Conduct of this sort becomes part of a moral order that generates debt and punishment, even in Buddhism. According to Graeber (2011), in Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Aramaic debt, guilt and sin are designated by one and the same word. Parents—father and mother—are also creators (in a biological sense) and are owed respect on account of this, independently of affective or existential links. These dominations or life-debts, whether spiritual or biological, are linked to tutelary figures that dictate social practices, symbolical identifications, and roles in which people play out their indebtedness and gratitude; all of which is highly normative. These authorities, whether religious or familial, impute debt and use it to reduce followers and dependents to various degrees of submission. There are no doubt exceptions to this rule, such as mysticism which, in Saint Theresa of Avila, for example, can transcend constraints and become an assertion of freedom, just as the family can to some extent emancipate its offspring, such as when the parents are themselves emancipated.

Today, however, the most obvious domination is that of the Market and its financial doppelganger. The market tout court is thought of as a field of initiative and possible success. It is open to everyone, and each is called on to show initiative. To undertake anything, however, one needs credit, and here a less promising figure makes its disturbing entrance to the stage. In today's context, indebtedness is not a heritage but an unavoidable part of the economic process. It is particularly painful in a period of financial crisis, with banks struggling to restore their tarnished image: that of

snake-oil hucksters, fabricators of “subprime” mortgages and toxic debts that have to be paid back at a loss by the borrowers, and sometimes even by the banks themselves; this has happened in Greece, where both borrowers and lenders have been forced to write off debts despite all the risks they have unwisely run. The write-off by banks that have been too greedy corresponds to a set of macroeconomic constraints that condition the survival of the country. It is certainly not a case of forgiveness of a sin, an act of divine clemency that rewards contrition accompanied by a firm purpose of amendment. It merely reveals the economic and financial value of time. For the banks, credit is a purchase of time at a price specified by contract. Time is money. However, the contract in question is not one between equals; its pseudoreciprocity masks an exploitation of time itself and a profoundly unfair exchange that alienates the borrower’s lifetime and freedom. Bank loans finance uses of the borrower’s time that have been assigned; most of the credit granted has to be devoted to narrowly prescribed purposes: consumption, real estate, and mobility (housing, cars, etc.). The practice of redeeming or repurchasing loans and of transferring debt from one establishment to another brings out clearly the mechanism that is at work, fraught with potential violence. As David Graeber<sup>1</sup> (2011) puts it: “Debt is simply a promise that can be quantified by means of money (and which thus becomes impersonal and consequently transferable).” Indirectly, this statement evokes an earlier, prefinancial age, when debt and credit functioned to a large extent within a framework of social relations that could not be quantified.

Gods, States, Family, the Market . . . This last term was soon to inherit from its predecessors their typological capitalisation, together with the status of commander and the function of command, bending to its will Gods, States, and parents, all of them reduced to the status of mere “stakeholders” in the rhetoric of technocratic governance. The Market was to become the master not only of the economic game but also of existence itself, like the gods of yore and the totalitarian States. With the latter, the Market got on rather well, as long as the States ensured stability, with or without infringement of democratic freedoms. This domination by the ultimate “creditor,” the Market, leads us to the other face of debt, its obverse: debt as the price of freedom.

## DEBT AS THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

The “Third World debt,” about which so much used to be said, was generated by several decades of aid to development, bilateral at first, then multilateral, in a context of pervasive neocolonialism. This particular debt became so mind boggling that repayment was unimaginable. In fact, it had been the case from the very beginning, inherent in a system that, although supposed to emancipate, was in fact designed to enchain. However that may

be, writing off the debt was presented as the ultimate gift, a gesture of pure philanthropy, that the so-called international community practised to perfection in order to sublimate its toxic schemes of pseudoredemption. Ten years later, the whole drama was rerun, the creditors' generous renunciation now preceded by rescheduling and accompanied by punitive measures—cuts in budgets, structural reforms, privatisations, deregulation, and sundry other demands. An interesting detail: what debts exactly were written off? Mostly the debts run up by private international agents (banks) rather than those incurred by governments or international financial organisations (such as the IMF), some agents apparently being rather “more equal” than others.

Although the debts of States on the brink of financial implosion could be written off, no such treatment was offered to struggling households, which were condemned to renegotiate their loans, to sell off their credit, and then to apply for microcredit (if they were sensitive to the “call of enterprise”), or finally to fall into dependency on government handouts (that came with moral strictures) or on private philanthropy. This list has been shortened but is nonetheless perfectly real.

References to solidarity, generosity, and spectacular philanthropic initiatives abound, developing during the years of the previous social and economic model and its deliberately contrived crisis. Numerous small-scale practices known as “alternative” emerged and were put forward as models for learning a different way of consuming, in a different environment with a different economy, involving more solidarity. Today, these various movements all share a common feature: they challenge commercial relationships and the Market as sole reality and advocate a return to social relationships that show more respect for men, women, and the environment.

Over and above these “alternative” circles and their solidarity-based vision of society, philanthropic discourse has embraced the theme of generosity. Its main vector is the typical NGO that as a “moral enterprise” (Hours, 2012) claims generosity as its social justification. Along the same lines, enterprise philanthropy is part of the moralisation of a capitalism that has been marred by workers' suicides and suffering, by catastrophes such as the collapse of industrial buildings in Bangladesh. The desire to restore a putative but dubious virginity leads enterprises to take ethical initiatives of all sorts, with or without the help of NGOs. This can be seen, quite rightly, as an attempt to launder capitalism, a purification ritual applied to the Market that, as the dominant institution, should be moral or at least seem so, veiling the violence of the exploitation it engenders. A mere tactic used by industrialists but an ideology adopted by “alternative” activists, this desire to humanise the capitalism of the 21st century can be traced in alliances—usually surprising and sometimes suspect—with NGOs that are scrounging for finance and enterprises seeking philanthropic or humanitarian alibis. Relieving or effacing the violence entailed by debt during the reign of the all-powerful market is showcased as a respected and eminently

respectable moral concern. It is explicitly a specific antidote to the alienation produced by the market in its captive clientele, high on a fleeting and fictitious freedom.

History, however, has already provided an ethical framework for loans without waiting for the postmodern era and its scruples: in the Middle Ages, both Christianity and Islam promulgated laws against usury—today adroitly circumvented by the infamous banks of the Vatican and the fabled Islamic finance with its ritual laundering of petrodollars. More generally, before money was used to measure debt, socioeconomic exchange was based on shared cultural codes that were linked to social practices that are seen today as economic. One could also say that the deregulated market economy has brought about a divorce between economy and society, and now tends to identify with the economy a society that has lost its autonomy. No longer a fertilising penetration, this linkage is in fact a mortal capture that has enabled the economy to replace society. An effacement of debt would be the diametrical opposite of these practices, which enslave society for its debt to finance. It would be an act that founds a freedom that has been recovered: an emancipation like that of a slave who has been freed from his chains. This other debt is the very opposite of the debt arising from exploitation, a debt recorded and built up in the same way as profit. When it is part of a universe of overall social exchange, debt can not only promote socioeconomic trading but also strengthen social relationships in general. This is why societies in which money has come into use relatively recently or where it takes on different forms provide us with a particularly instructive insight into the meaning of debt.

The Market—that colossus with feet of clay—is based on pyramids of private debts that are the product of its own delirium: it results not only in cyclical crises but also in an unappeasable yearning for freedom from its constraints. Freedom from debt is something aspired to by economic agents as different as citizens, enterprises, and States. After each crisis, each of these agents pays off part of the debt. The real alternative would be a write-off: putting the meter back to zero, refounding society, or taking some other radical step that would invalidate previous accounts and simply throw them out. A step of this sort—today still a posture or an aspiration—would establish an absolute freedom, to be shared by both creditor and debtor. The debtor would be freed from the constraints of the debt, and new options would open up for him. The creditor would act as a “big man,” able to engage in potlatch, the agonistic destruction of the base on which his power is founded. This destruction of power would produce prestige and proclaim a status far higher than that of the miserly calculating creditor who figures in most societies. Lordly figures of today like Bill Gates are merely pallid versions of this big man: they do not dilapidate but merely make investments in a different register, switching from economic and financial markets to markets for global ethical goods in sectors such as health and the environment.

A radical reading of debt annulment would take us to a completely different world. Debt would become merely a passing phase in the process of exchange and nothing more. In the subsequent phase, annulment, society would be regenerated, the pump of exchange reprimed, and social dynamics set in motion once again. This would run until the next rise in tension and risk of a crisis or a block, which in turn would call for a new annulment. Debt would thus be a marker in the cycle of exchange, unavoidable but a passing phase, and not a hemming of horizons, closing in and durably overwhelming, in accounts from which there can be no escape. Debt, so to speak, would no longer be run up to be paid but rather to be cancelled. It would be one of the keys to social dynamics. It would also reset the market at each phase of its cycle—with the obvious proviso that the market renounced all claims to constitute the entirety of society: its basic claim today.

Annulment of debt would be an obstacle to all lasting domination and open the way to social dynamics by freeing social agents, letting them out of their cage, like birds. It could also be seen as a form of generosity, not the miserly reductions that characterise current practice, but a sort of potlatch that, however, would not generate a primary status. In other words, it would be a generosity neutral in its hierarchical effects, a generosity that did not give rise to influence that sustains domination. The price of debt would be that of freedom regained, in complete contrast to the voluntary servitude encysted in market accountancy. Melanesian societies provide us with a lot of matter for thought on this subject.

## THE CARGO CULT OR THE INVENTION OF DEBT IN MELANESIA

Research carried out between 1973 and 1976, on the eve of the independence of Vanuatu, on Nagriamel, a messianic movement in the New Hebrides, throws light on several facets of the meaning of debt, and on the absence of debt in Melanesian societies. Today, some 40 years later, the capital, Port Vila, has become a refuge for fiscal debtors from Asia, the Pacific, and the planet as a whole. By nature, tax havens are necessarily global. Systemic dissimulation requires this.

Back in 1973, Nagriamel was a land-claim movement that had been founded on the island of Santo. Its name is a contraction of those of two plants that traditionally symbolised culture: *nangaria* and *namuwele*. A Franco-British condominium, the New Hebrides was about to gain independence as a new State, Vanuatu.

The island of Santo is the largest of the archipelago, which is composed of numerous islands that in many cases have different languages. At the turn of the 19th century, before this colonisation of the land, there had been intense missionary activity in the New Hebrides by European Christian churches, in particular British and Australian Protestants and Anglicans.

In the 20th century, Melanesian microsocieties were to a large extent reconfigured by the impact of two sociocultural changes. The first of these was missionary activity. In each island, territories were identified by church affiliations. Mission villages, each founded by a missionary and subsequently run by a succession of other missionaries, at first “White” and then sometimes “native,” restructured the use of space by society, and brought about a greater concentration of dwelling along the coast in missionary enclaves: Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Evangelical. In the more densely populated regions, there was a village every two or three kilometres, run by a particular mission; interspersed between them were more sparsely populated “pagan” areas. Missions were—and still are today—a major factor in the territorial, political, and social structuring of society; the main local missionary, whether foreign or “native,” held moral sway over his community of faithful impregnated with messianic Christianity of one sort or another.

Between the world wars, a plantation economy had developed; subsequently it was supplemented by bovine cattle ranching. Plantation economy was the second shock that destructured the previous form of society. It introduced practices that were completely unprecedented. The most consequential of these were the grabbing of coastal land and the appearance of wage labour and of money, which was used to remunerate work. As coastal sites were more accessible than those inland, plantations developed along the coasts, where it was easier to embark copra and export it; the hinterland in the centres of the islands—in some cases hilly or mountainous—was less favourable. The colonists thus ended up surrounding the traditional society to a variable extent, pushing it back into the hinterland. Christianised groups also occupied mostly coastal land.

Confined to the bush in the hinterland, traditional groups had only episodic contact with the coast. They would go there to work in the plantations, spending their meagre earnings at the planters’ stores—and also discovering new goods. The closer-knit Christian communities and the plantation economy introduced them to the Market, to money, and to paid labour: that is, to radically new terms of exchange. This traumatic encounter was the source of cargo cults, even though it was not necessarily the only cause.

Founded in the late 1960s by an Anglo-Hebridean Métis, Jimmy Stevens (Hours, 1974, 1976a, 1976b), together with Paul Buluk, a traditional chief, Nagriamel launched a struggle in the name of customary rights against the land pressures that cut off access to the sea. It demanded in particular the return of the vast areas taken over by the *Compagnie Française des Nouvelles Hébrides* and land bought for a few sticks of tobacco at the turn of the century. The movement thus articulated two characteristics. It claimed land on behalf of the first occupiers, asserting a cultural custom linked to a heritage of norms, values, and land uses; the reference to custom spearheaded the expansion of Nagriamel throughout the archipelago. The movement had little to do with the “man school” people—Christianised



and mission schooled—and was to some extent opposed to them. But it was not in favour of a simple return to custom; the members of Nagriamel were fascinated by the agricultural machinery, tools, and technology they had seen at work in the plantations—not to speak of the ships and aircraft—the American bombers and fighters glimpsed on the base on Santo during the Americano-Japanese conflict that shook the region during the Second World War. Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands is less than 500 km away.

Although Nagriamel set the “black bush” against the world of the Whites, it was nonetheless captivated by development, the term employed in the 1970s. Seen as a messianic expectancy, development gave rise to demonstrations, with an unambiguously imperative slogan: Nowia development (in Pidgin: development now!). It was this messianic dimension that made Nagriamel a cargo cult: the land claimed, together with the means of production, served as a basis for expectations that were little short of miraculous. When Nagriamel was given back a few hectares or cleared new ground using the old tractors donated by planters, as soon as the equipment broke down or came up against the very first obstacle, it was abandoned. Meanwhile, the organisation held endless meetings imitating the activities of government and planning—but without ever getting round to action—collective work to attain the vast ambitions of the community that convened at Vanafo, the “capital” of the movement. In actual fact, this capital was than the seat of a parody of government: a big village with a population of 300.

The meagre crops of the native plantations were put into storage, awaiting export to New Caledonia. As there was no real outlet for it, however, they rotted on the spot or were eaten by rats. The long wait to enter a mythical market is typical of cargo cults and could be observed in several movements, such as the “marching rule” at Malaita and many cults recorded in New Guinea. There is a difference between cults that are essentially ritual, such as the John Frum movement at Tanna (Vanuatu), where an American, John Frum, the providential bearer of all the good things expected (the “cargo”), is invoked and awaited at weekly dance sessions on which the unending and fruitless delay have no effect whatever, as it is precisely the waiting, the expectation that gives the cults their meaning. Lack of results is irrelevant and is ignored. But could one not say much the same thing about development and even democracy? Are not both of these constantly invoked and awaited in much the same way? Mythical postponements and expectations, however, can often be more than mere repetitive rites and lead to social unrest and political strife. This was the case with Nagriamel, which developed throughout the archipelago and ended up as a political party that still exists today and is represented by members in parliament. The leader was jailed after proclaiming the secession of the island of Santo when Vanuatu became independent. The military of Papua New Guinea were called into restore order. The movement suffered several casualties, its political stance having been manipulated by francophone parties that were against independence. Multiple contradictions such as these are accepted without

much difficulty by movements of this sort. They explain why Nagriamel has survived to the present day, at least in name, its emergence having been intimately connected to the ambiguities inherent in the dual colonisation of the territory and its two-headed rule: the Franco-British Condominium of the New Hebrides.

Such are the ritualistic and political dimensions of the cargo cults. We come now to their economic aspects. These are embodied in the projects of communities that, partly free from the influence and control of the missions, found themselves facing the colonial market economy that was unravelling native societies. When Papua New Guinea gained its independence, many community-based and cooperative economic projects emerged, although often only briefly. Most of them fell through because of poor management and economic results; many of them, however, transformed into political parties engaged in local micropolitics. Nagriamel is a case in point, a perfect illustration of these diverse dimensions, with its mythical expectations and community rituals, such as the daily flag-raising ceremony. Its political aspirations made it easy prey to various interests. Its project of an economic development that mimed that of the Whites was typical of cargo cults—its expectation of a return that was due, that is, owed to the islanders. This brings us back to the debt that seems to lie at the heart of movements of this type.

The promises of Christianity were inevitably messianic; they combined on another level with the financial and economic practices of the colonial market, and this had traumatic effects. How exactly did this come about? Many hypotheses have been formulated. In this chapter, we will develop one that is based on Melanesian trade cycles, of which the *kula* studied by Malinowski is an example.

Debt produces power and is produced by power. In Melanesian societies, whether based on rank and measured in terms of pig's teeth, titles, or the figures of "big men," power exists only in order to stimulate exchange and cannot be capitalised without exposing its abuser to drastic sanctions. As it is circulation that feeds the trade cycles, the nature of the goods traded (e.g. axes, pigs, or mats) is immaterial and varies from one group and island to another. In this circular world, there is no such thing as debt. Hoarding and capitalisation are banned—unless the sums saved are contributed within a set period to the flow of trade that produces social linkage: such is the rule that founds membership of an insular micro-society. The overall nature of these dynamics is basically static: the flow feeds the cyclical circulation but at the same time precludes all modification of the cycle—a regular movement that is thus also static. Thus time itself is a link in a system of this sort, as it ensures perpetuation of the rules governing trade and their identical reproduction. Duration is permanent, as no termination can ever be set. The nonexistence of credit and the lack of instruments of measurement make debt impossible. It is not surprising that economists take an interest in primitive currencies: here we have a system that is the polar opposite of the

economic market, trade being the only element common to the two systems. But in the Melanesian system, trade functions with a different objective and in ways that are practically the antithesis of those of a market economy. In a capitalist economy, default on a debt is a moral fault. In the Melanesian cycle, any attempt to measure a default blocks the cycle, constituting a social fault, breaking not a contractual link but a social one, putting an end to membership of society and leading inexorably to ostracism and death.

In Melanesia, what is most important is the fact of circulation and not the volume of its flow. It is this that makes it impossible for debt to be contracted; these societies are by their very nature free of debt. It is this absence of debt in traditional Melanesian societies that enables us to formulate our hypothesis explaining cargo cults.

Cargo cults emerged in two waves. The first took place during the 1920 to 1940 period; it resulted from the conjunction of the colonial plantation economy and the Christian missions. It consisted mainly of incantation rituals practiced by groups that, relegated to the bush and kept away from the missions and the plantations, attempted to produce benchmarks of some sort in an unfamiliar universe over which they had no control, its rules and meaning being very literally beyond them. Their rituals can be seen as a quest for the powers and autonomy that they had lost. The best known of the rituals was the "Vailala madness" (Williams, 1934). Like the other rituals, it was seen as an expression of mental derangement rather than an exacerbated reaction to the invasive presence of Whites: that is, a mobilisation of available ritualistic resources to confront these strange intruders and their perplexing behaviour.

The second wave was produced by a shock of a different sort: the impressive display of American machines during World War II. This triggered a desire to master these machines. It was subsequently sharpened by the fact that when the Americans withdrew at the end of the war, they left nothing behind, throwing into the sea jeeps, trucks, and other equipment that they were unable to take away with them (the wreckage can still be seen at Luganville on the island of Santo at what is known as Million Dollar Point). This huge display of wealth, followed by a total absence of gifts—the very antithesis of the traditional cycle of exchange—remained an enigma for the local population. It was on the island of Santo that Nagriamel was to emerge—no mere coincidence. It was here, on the wartime naval and air force base, that American power at its most impressive was flaunted and then veiled—or rather secreted. This gave rise to a sort of debt in a society that ignored debt: the obscure part of an abortive cycle of exchange that had been broken, abandoned, and jettisoned. No attempt whatever was made to recycle in the form of trade the array of goods that had been put on display. This was the most radical negation imaginable of exchange, of reciprocity, and of the cycle that social bonds were based on. The clash was total between the traditional cycle and the market economy, with its parsimony, accounting, and debt: a confrontation with radical otherness, replicating

that reported by the first Western navigators to land on these Pacific shores. The impact of these primary encounters with strangers who arrived with a weapon in one hand and in the other gifts of tools or beads was fundamental, the beginning of a countdown, the start of a cycle either of exchange and life or of death and destruction. There was no place for purchase or debt but only one for exchange or death. This very first minute on the beaches of the islands was also the first minute in the islanders' economy, the first meeting with Whites, Christianity, the Western market and its forces.

According to our hypothesis, the cargo cult would thus be an attempt to restart the cycle of exchange and reinstall practices in accordance with the rules of a reciprocity that has no end other than itself and bears no relation to any form of contract. Confronted with the unilateral purchase of labour for the plantations, the natives felt that they were being despoiled. Their engagement was momentary, giving rise to no lasting social relationships, and was not part of a cycle of exchange. It was completely foreign to the only available model that enabled them to interpret what was happening. This was how they came to feel that these Whites were despoiling them and owed something to the Melanesians. Their niggardly conduct in keeping goods to themselves and their miserly calculations were the very opposite of the flamboyant generosity that characterized the traditional cycle of exchange. Thus to a large extent, cargo cults were a demand, in the form of ritual and myth, for payment of the debt imputed and for fairer terms of trade. When they were political, the claims were addressed to the colonial authorities. At the same time, they were a ritual of incantation, the performance of an expectation. The cargo expected was owed to the natives, as they had shown confidence in contributing their labour. The cults were both a protest against the diversion of cargo and an expectation of its return—pending the reimbursement that would enable the despoiled population to find a proper place in the Western market economy and to start again, after the break due to foreigners' interference, the cycle of exchange and reciprocity. Logically, this repetitive appeal took the ritualised form of a mythical expectation: one of the terms of exchange was missing. There were no partners among the local Whites, so others had to be invented, partners more generous than the local Whites and able to enter into an intelligible and lasting social relationship. Whether the cargo arrived by sea or air was not really important. What mattered was that it was to come from elsewhere, from a world where Whites were "normal" people, benevolent, honest, and generous—Whites who, unlike the colonials, were capable of exchange and reciprocity.

## DEBT AS THE INIQUITOUS PART OF TRADE

Seen as a factor in matters of freedom and alienation, debt is a curse; it constitutes a major lever of domination; it can have anthropological value only when it is cancelled and reveals the generosity that can serve as a basis

for more robust and durable arrangements—arrangements that are not susceptible to constant failure, like those of the contemporary market society. It is in these terms that the philanthropic practices of the West (and China) are interpreted as transparent attempts merely to “launder” capitalism. The current crisis brings us closer to the moment when debits due will be reevaluated, seen from a moral and not merely utilitarian point of view. Debt will have to be redefined morally, but as something other than a fault. The global pyramid of debt will eventually have to be revealed as a scam: a fraud that has simply been generalised and as a result now seems normal. Awareness of this is dawning, slowly but surely. It is not the debtor who owes something but the system that has indebted him. It is the system—the society that is constantly offering loans that seem too good to be turned down—that owes individuals something. The propagation of debt has resulted in a new form of slavery. It now survives only by dint of commercial and philanthropic expedients: promises of programmed expectations almost as mythical as those of the cargo cults, their followers also potential microentrepreneurs, awaiting microcredits to come out of the blue . . .

It is by no means unreasonable today to think that capitalism is rushing towards its own implosion. The commercialisation and capture of so-called alternative practices by enterprises on the lookout for fictitious solidarity will no doubt turn out to be a mere passing phase: the phase in which we happen to be living today.

The Melanesian cargo cultists, Karl Marx and Polanyi, each *mutatis mutandis* in his own way, tell us that it cannot be possible to reproduce indefinitely a process that kills off societies, tears social links apart, and condemns trade to repetitive crises, assigning individuals to set roles and expecting them to remain faithful to the script. Today in 2015 in Vanuatu, big banks are laundering dirty money and facilitating tax evasion by the wealthy, although at Tanna, Melanesians dance at the foot of the volcano Yasur, waiting for John Frum to arrive with his cargo, or a multinational named Nagriamel to develop at Santo. Our detour via Melanesia has enabled us to confront two systems, each closed off from the other and, as a result, equally mythical. The fact that one of them is “macro” and global and the other “micro” and local does not change the need to find ways of making the economy more anthropological, anthropology having accomplished a few decades ago the necessary clarification of noncommercial economies at the end of the colonial period.

Today in formerly industrialised societies, a desire is emerging to consume in a manner that respects solidarity and communities. Confronted with this, a demand for restoration both of meaning and of place, major capitalist groups are planning to capture these alternative consumers. A return to local gathering is no doubt not exactly the miracle awaited in either Europe or Vanuatu in these times of globalisation, but it does nonetheless indicate—explicitly—the permanence of a quest for meaning. This quest has been growing from day to day ever since the light of progress died

down and the retiarus of neoliberal governance cast its net over a humanity that, appalled and indignant, is pinioned by the myth of debt. *Usque tandem . . . ?* When will it end? Could this happen without a paroxysm? Will debt accumulate until all of it has to be cancelled everywhere?

## NOTE

1. [http://oclibertaire.free.fr/spip.php?article1264&cvar\\_recherche=graeber](http://oclibertaire.free.fr/spip.php?article1264&cvar_recherche=graeber)

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