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David Graeber, Democracy, and Social Studies Curriculum

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Abstract

This essay places David Graeber's consistent focus on imagination and possibilities into conversation with social studies education. In a sociopolitical climate characterized by neoliberalism, militarized borders, and political censorship of social studies teaching and learning in P-12 schools, it is crucial that social studies teachers and teacher educators in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere continue to engage in pedagogies that are critical and responsive, providing students with representations of the past and present that, rather than reproducing the status quo, playfully imagine alternative futures that are more equitable, just, and free. Building from Graeber's work in direct civic action, this essay offers ideas for how standardized social studies concepts can be reconfigured in affecting, life-giving ways.

> At times I feel your voice is reaching me from far away, while I am prisoner
> of a gaudy and unlivable present, where all forms of human society
> have reached an extreme of their cycle and there is no imagining what new forms
> they may assume. And I hear, from your voice, the invisible reasons
> which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, they will come to life again.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1978)

Social studies standards are comprised of numerous concepts (e.g., democracy, citizenship), civic actions (e.g., voting, jury duty, volunteering), "content" (e.g., historical narratives, economic platitudes), and values (e.g., democratic principles, civic virtues), what amounts to an organized collection of overarching aims, broad generalizations, and neat definitions.[1] This amalgam of curricular representations is necessarily idealized and open to interpretation, one unavoidable result of standardization—axiomatics for contextless masses. For example, the concept of democracy is rendered in The C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards [hereafter referred to as The Framework] (2013) in vague, contradictory ways, revealing a number of critical questions: Does a democracy necessarily position particular adults in authority over others? What is the relationship between the United States government and democratic participation? What is the relationship between democratic principles like liberty, freedom, and state power? And, predictably perhaps, one fundamental question is entirely absent from The Framework: What *is* democracy? Instead, honing in on the concept of authority in a "democratic society," the first Civics Standard (2013) asks students, by the end of Grade 2, to "Describe the roles and responsibilities of people in authority" (p. 32), a task that is breathtaking in its understated but unobscured aim: to limit, from the beginning of a child's life in school, how human relations *can be*. To make power stuck. To make the authority of one over another as natural, as given.

First, I will clarify that the aim of this essay is not to critique The Framework (2013) line by line. The low-hanging fruit that is a single standard—vague and broad, intended for implementation in diverse settings—is, in fact, a boon for smart, critical teachers. A space that, if one chooses to see it this way, is filled with creative, radical potential. Rather, what I am interested in is how concepts (like democracy or freedom) become so idealized—so entrenched in discourses like schooling and "the grammar of social studies" (Evans, 2011)—that they are, in effect, disappeared—robbed of their radical potentialities. And inevitably, mandated curriculum like The Framework (2013) further this disappearance because they are political texts, a list of carefully-curated, agreed-upon statutes that have been deliberated—and subsequently simplified—to the point of meaninglessness. Through this, the political—a sphere constituted by conceptual contestation and actions that directly address systemic (political) violence—is undermined by dual emphases on individual responsibility and a volunteerism rife with politicophobia (Graeber, 2011a;

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[1] Although, with regards to "values" in standardized curriculum (e.g., The C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards, 2013), it is as though, on the one hand, values are absent; The Framework (2013), true to the precepts of social science, are presented as a list of objective truths—free of bias and uncontaminated by a value system(s). On the other hand, The Framework (2013) is shot through with one overarching value system: capitalism. One brief example: In an overview of The Framework's Economic Standards—and in just the second paragraph—we read how important it is for students to "develop a strong base of knowledge about *human capital* [emphasis added]" (p. 35), a statement that, regardless of what one thinks of it, is a deeply political statement—a value judgement touching on the intrinsic properties of human life.

McLaren, 2017; Ross, 2017), foci that align with the efficient preparation of neoliberal citizens: life *qua* work; life *qua* wealth accumulation; life *qua* eternal consumption.

I ask, what does it mean to teach "civic virtues" (The Framework, 2013), described as honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives, and "democratic principles," listed as equality, freedom, liberty, respect for individual rights, and deliberation, in a society infected with neoliberalism? Indeed, what is the function of civic virtues and democratic principles in a society saturated with predictive data points—a decision-making system that leverages the competition of the market to arrive at what is the objectively-best market-based solution to "common or public problems" (p. 31)? What is the purpose of deliberation in a market-obsessed society in which schools and universities are run like businesses and students are customers? A society in which the very meaning of civic virtues and democratic principles are completely confused and upside down, deliberately misnamed and appropriated, weaponized and made intentionally murky?

The Framework (2013) and other standardized social studies curriculum present ideals that are, invariably, separate from the material world—an ontoepistemological dilemma unifying Plato and Descartes, Kant and Hegel, Marx and Mao. The distance between an ideal and reality is a given. But I am interested in what happens when a concept's idealized forms (like democracy or freedom) become so removed from the everyday lives of teachers and students that the ideal itself is dismissed as impossible, thereby erasing its radical potential to ignite the imaginations of teachers and students? To be imagined and subsequently embodied via future action?[2] Often, a new ideal takes shape, a reconceptualization commended for being realistic, "up to date," and legible upon a landscape inundated with foci on understanding how things *are*—and therefore *will be*—as opposed to how things *could be*. Here, we can see how the promise of an *ideal*, or what could more generatively be thought of as *a provocative (con)figuration at capacity with disruptive potentialities*, is lessened, force-fit to align with a status quo unequivocally at war with all threats of disruption. The question, then, is not whether The Framework (2013) is complicit in furthering neoliberal educational aims. We know it is. Standardization itself is a neoliberal practice, full stop; a totalizing discourse that conceives of "an education" as a commodity that is trackable, data-driven, and striving to be checked off, finished, and credentialed. A tool of social control meant to reproduce, not disrupt, the status quo. Neither is the question how teachers might abandon national standards like The Framework (2013). Like any tool, The Framework is imperfect, but as I mentioned above, social studies teachers can use The Framework as a critical jumping off point; a text to deconstruct, critique, and reimagine—not view as scripture. This is one approach I aim to model in this essay.

So then, and following this, at least one question might be how can teachers contest and reignite the concepts that constitute national and provincial standards like The Framework? What dangerously radical potentialities might be uncovered?

These initial musings capture the central thrust of this essay, and it is a line of inquiry that stems from my readings of David Graeber, the late activist, anthropologist, and teacher. A leader of global justice and direct-action movements in the late-1990s and early-2000s (e.g., Seattle,

[2] This is often the case when "democracy" is qualified as "pure" or "direct," forms of "democracy" that are derided as antiquated, impractical, and too unwieldy for populous societies, a dismissal that works, simultaneously, to endorse one alternative—the representation of a populous society by a few of its wealthy citizens—as the most reasonable, commonsense alternative. As "democracy" in an altered and reduced form. A "democratic republic."

Genoa), the Occupy Movement, and other protests against the neoliberal state-corporation nexus, Graeber was also a scholar and teacher—a trained anthropologist, a professor at Yale and the London School of Economics, and also a teacher of children in community groups in the UK and the EU (see anthropology4kids.org). It is impossible to summarize a lifelong project so radically interdisciplinary, so provocatively tethered to activism on the ground, but Graeber's participation in diverse assemblies of protest throughout his life stemmed from his strong commitments to the *possibilities* available to the human imagination, a collective dream machine capable of imagining future ways of being and feeling that are more just, equitable, and devoted to the flourishing of everyone—human and nonhuman. Graeber's (2011a) conceptualization of the imagination emphasized immanence: It is "in no sense static and free-floating but entirely caught up in projects of action that aim to have real effects on the material world, and as such, always changing and adapting" (p. 53). In my view, Graeber's formulation of collective, imaginary projects that demand real action possesses radical implications for social studies education, as well as his attention to the agency of concepts and the (his)stories we tell ourselves about the past-present-future, particularly in social studies subjects like history, civics, and economics.

Graeber died unexpectedly on September 2, 2020, but his prolific, interdisciplinary projects were unified by at least two through lines: a) the transformative power of the human *imagination*, and b) *possibilities*—the unwavering belief that life itself—how we *are*, *know*, and *feel* with one another—can be otherwise. Systems and structures can be reimagined, radically altered, or simply forsaken. Even as neoliberal fascism commands ways of being, knowing, and feeling that seem entrenched—lives defined by self-exploitation and the notion that just getting by is the best we can do—Graeber's work illuminates the human capacity to imagine alternative futures (Berlant, 2011; Berlant & Stewart, 2019; Giroux, 2021; Graeber, 2007, 2021a). And crucially, Graeber's imagination work—the imagined futures he offers—are pragmatically connected to the past-present, not in a constraining sense—thereby reducing what might be possible—but, with an instructive sleight of hand, Graeber's *possibilities* are rendered as possible because his projects are intent on showing how human beings *have* lived, and *are* living, in decidedly *other* ways. Drawing from anthropology, archaeology, economics, history, and other disciplines, Graeber's possibilities emanate from past-present examples, diverse ways of being that extend from the Malagasy Highlands to Zuccotti Park to the city of Cahokia on the banks of the Mississippi. Ultimately, Graeber's interdisciplinary projects unite to contest at least one precept of neoliberalism: *This is how the world is*, full stop (Klein, 2008). It is an approach that works in two directions; firstly, illuminating how close, attainable, and *very real* other ways of being, knowing, and feeling actually are (because they have been (and are being) lived), and secondly, providing the imagination with a springboard, something firm to stand on before leaping into the unknown.

So, connecting Graeber to social studies education, whether as P-12 teachers, teacher educators, or curriculum designers and theorists, I wonder what it would mean to both refuse and radically reconfigure the neoliberal assumptions and "truths" that saturate national and provincial social studies standards. I wonder what it would mean to re-center imagination and possibility in social studies education, two concepts that feel washed out after decades of reappropriation. It is instructive to remember that, in recent memory, both words were ubiquitous; global justice movements *imagined* alternative *possibilities* for how we might *be*, *know*, and *feel* with one another in the world—capitalism was vulnerable, and a world without hunger, without nuclear arms, without arbitrary authority, without war, seemed possible, or, at the least, possibilities worth

fighting for (Katsiaficas et al., 2018).[3] Now, after decades of neoliberal austerity and propaganda, a world *without* capitalism is a vision quickly dismissed as impossible, dystopic, or both (Graeber, 2011a). Following this, to what extent are such possibilities (along with infinite others) largely foreclosed upon in today's social studies classrooms? And, on the flipside, are past-present-futures represented, and taught, in ways that reinforce neoliberal assumptions? A world rendered *as is*, static and immutable, so abstract that *understanding* supersedes *direct action* as the pedagogical aim? Here, 1968, 1999, and 2011 are not phantasmatic dreamscapes of activist potential; rather, past actions serve as affecting reminders to our interdisciplinary field that teachers and students can change the world—what might be one aim of social studies educators (Cohn-Bendit & Leggewie, 2018).

Finally, the *possibilities* I imagine, and offer, in this essay are not daunting overhauls but accessible, small adjustments to how we think, and come to know, as teachers, ways of slowing down, and perhaps redirecting, our quick, habituated jumps to define, explain, and settle: playful reconceptualizations of overly-familiar concepts (e.g., democracy, the "west"); reconfigurations of calcified relations (e.g., with one another, the state); pragmatic (active) reattunements to a world replete with problems, pain, and structural violence; and storytelling practices (about the past-present) that meander off the beaten path, inviting new, *largely untold* stories about how humans have lived with one another in radically *other* ways over the past 300,000 years. Or, to put it another way, approaches to social studies education that are committed to being in touch with the world; not sealed off by historicism and abstract inquiry but resolutely *activist* in multiplicitous directions, grounded in critical inquiries that might be unified by at least one aim—to change the world rather than reproduce the status quo.

Many critical social studies education teachers and teacher educators are engaged in this work, and so this essay is a creative, playful attempt to further such aims, building from, and alongside, prior projects similarly interested in imagining alternative possibilities for social studies curriculum and teaching (DeLeon, 2008; Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022; Ross, 2017). In the next section, I discuss the method of analysis guiding this essay: an attitude of conceptual contestation I view as a through line across Graeber's work—an embodied methodological attitude I aim to both model and offer as *possible* for social studies teaching and learning. By positioning Graeber's attitude of conceptual contestation as an embodied "methodological lifestyle," I aim to forefront the importance of critical conceptual contestation with(in) and alongside the embodiment of all civic actions, a dialectic I find particularly generative for the field of social studies education in this time of standardized conceptual malaise.

A Lived Methodology of Conceptual Contestation

In 2018, I was introduced to Graeber's work by a friend. They had just purchased, and read very quickly, a worn copy of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Graeber, 2011b) at a used bookstore. They gave it to me, I read it, and then repeated the gesture, pressing it upon an unassuming acquaintance a few weeks later. Anyhow, *Debt* (2011b) is a book that lingered. I found Graeber's

[3] While 1968 is a year that has come to stand for revolution, imagination, and possibility (at least for those on the left), it is crucial to remember one obvious, but often discounted, fact: other justice movements followed and continue to proliferate. The "global justice movement" protests against the WTO and IMF in Seattle, Genoa, and elsewhere in 1999 and 2000; the Arab Spring in 2010-2012; the Occupy Movement in 2011; Standing Man in Istanbul in 2013; and worldwide protests against racism, white supremacy, and police violence in 2020 after the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN. This list is far from exhaustive.

conclusions troubling and his writing thrilling (always an activist first and academic second, Graeber's prose reads like a manuscript doubling as a pamphlet), and as I moved from *Debt* (2011b) to Graeber's other books and articles, I realized his approach—what I characterize as a method of unrelenting conceptual contestation—was starting to seep into my work as a social studies teacher educator: His unsparing (and contagious) commitment to deconstructing the concepts (e.g., debt, democracy) that exceed normativity, concepts we accept at face value and no longer think about—completely banal in their givenness, yet prolific in perpetuating structural violence.

Conceptual Contestation in Social Studies Teaching and Teacher Education

In this section I am aiming to do two things at once: first, I will expand on this notion of a lived methodology of conceptual contestation, showing how Graeber's penchant for disrupting ossified concepts was, quite crucially, grounded not only by his activism on the ground (his material contestations of immaterial concepts) but also by his attentiveness—in an empirical sense—to how things *have been* and *are*. While not a positivist, per se, Graeber's imagined possibilities were still constituted by real-world examples—by empirical data generated in the field, primarily as an anthropologist in Madagascar and then also as a researching academic and teacher-activist—and his ethnographic work laid the groundwork for his (re)theorizations of debt, democracy, and freedom (to name a few). Graeber's approach shapes what is, perhaps, my primary argument in this essay: that social studies teachers and teacher educators can also engage in this work of conceptual contestation with their students. Or, to put it more specifically, I suggest Graeber's oeuvre offers a trove of provocatively-reconceptualized concepts that are available to social studies teachers. This essay aims to demonstrate a few ways they might be taken up, a sort of entry point to his work.

And so, my second aim flows from my first: to demonstrate, on a meta-level, how a concept like debt (and democracy in the subsequent section) can be contested and reconfigured in both K-12 and teacher education classrooms. Indeed, it is within the contestation of concepts that the imagination of alternative possibilities can be brought to bear in classrooms. For example, in my work with social studies teacher candidates, we examine provincial and/or national standards through what I call a critical conceptual lens, meaning, before we take a given standard at face value, we, as teachers, think carefully about the concepts at play in a given standard. It is common for teachers, particularly new teachers, to skip this step; a standard is read, accepted, and a lesson's objective takes shape—a cyclical process with which we are familiar. But I encourage my teacher candidates to take pause—delaying the ever-eager impulse to simply locate and deploy an already-familiar definition. Within this break, we practice reflexive readings of a standard to consider how a potential lesson might work to further, complicate, or contest that standard's conceptual foundations—what amounts to a style of *imagining* curriculum. Beginning by identifying the concept(s) at play (a crucial teaching task in and of itself), we embark on what I think of as one of the more thrilling intellectual practices of social studies teaching—the exploration (within social-cultural theory, public scholarship, and the teacher candidates' areas of expertise and interest) of alternative ways a certain concept has been conceived. This is not a profound approach—Maxine Greene (1978) and others have called on teachers to combat the stultifying "givenness" of curriculum for decades—but through this, my teacher candidates are practicing a form of social studies teaching that starts from a point of contestation instead of givenness, a stance that, in my view, fosters an attitude of intellectual freedom within the work of teaching that feels provocative

upon today's neoliberal education landscape. I'll add, too, that the logic at play here is *not* one that figures a concept's prevalent use as "incorrect," amounting to finding the "correct" conceptualization; democracy, for example, has been theorized for millennia in numerous, even contradictory, ways. Rather, conceptual contestation is an embrasure of the agonism inherent to a world filled with difference, paradox, and contradiction (Mouffe, 2009). In this essay I argue these complexities might be invited into social studies teaching in generative ways. Again, it is not that Graeber's conceptual contestations provide the "right" conceptualizations, but that they *open up* overly-familiar concepts for teachers and students, uncovering latent possibilities.

Finally, before I turn to debt, I want to briefly return to The Framework (2013) to further clarify how conceptual contestation might be realized in social studies classrooms. The very first Economics standard in The Framework reads as follows: In grades K-2, students will "Explain how scarcity necessitates decision making" (p. 35). Now, in a teacher education course focused on K-3 Elementary Social Studies (like the one I currently teach), the concept of scarcity is ripe for contestation, and I can imagine positioning my teacher candidates to encounter just a few of scarcity's many sociopolitical and historical contingencies. For example, premodern societies operating according to Greek, Christian, and Islamic traditions did not conceive of scarcity as an inevitable biproduct of growth; instead, "scarcity" offered serious moral and ethical implications that remain with us today (Reda, 2018). And while modern theorists like Keynes, Smith, Malthus, and Marx viewed scarcity as a necessary phase of human history, there are other modern and postmodern ways of approaching this slippery concept (2018). For instance, relating scarcity to education in explicit, critical terms, Illich (1970) framed scarcity as a result of formal schooling. Far from natural, scarcity is created by the

> Converging self-interests (that) now conspire to stop a man from sharing his skill. The man who has the skill profits from its scarcity and not from its reproduction. The teacher who specializes in transmitting the skill profits from the artisan's unwillingness to launch his own apprentice into the field. The public is indoctrinated to believe that skills are valuable and reliable only if they are the result of formal schooling. The job market depends on making skills scarce and on keeping them scarce, either by proscribing their unauthorized use and transmission or by making things which can be operated and repaired only by those who have access to tools or information which are kept scarce. (p. 88)

Following Reda (2018), "The example of education, argues Illich (1970), can be generalized to all professions. Scarcity is created along with the professional class" (p. 71), who could not become dominant unless particular skills, lacks, and needs are labeled as such.

My point, here, is that a concept like scarcity would be taken at face value by the majority of my teacher candidates—a common phenomenon in how teachers engage with standards. And while I am not suggesting teacher candidates spend a week reading Malthus, Illich, and Reda to disrupt their preconceptions of scarcity, this method of opening up a concept—contesting its givenness—is readily available within teacher education; introducing a standard, locating its concept(s), and modeling the contestation of a concept becomes its own sort of habit of practice—an attitude of conceptual contestation that might become one part of our approach to the standardized documents that shape our field. From there, how our students render a concept like scarcity in their future Grade 2 classrooms is an open question, but this openness is the crux of the matter: rather than approaching social studies teaching (and teacher education) as a simple matter

of defining and explaining how things *are*, teaching can be an unfolding project of critical, exploratory reconceptualization that can look any number of ways.

In the next section I work through another example of conceptual contestation—debt—a concept at capacity with curriculum connection points for K-12 teachers. For instance, in British Columbia's Grade 6 Social Studies Curriculum (2016), students are "expected to know the roles of individuals, governmental organizations (e.g., World Trade Organization, activists), and NGOs… [as well as] globalization, economic interdependence (e.g., G20 (Group of 20), [and the] North American Free Trade Act)" (p. 30-31). Needless to say, David Graeber spent his career working against the presumed benevolence of global organizations cloaked in lofty titles (particularly from a Western perspective). And perhaps most excitingly, B.C.'s standards are remarkably open—and in this sense inviting—of such contestations.

Debt: A Case Study of Conceptual Contestation with(in) Economics Education

Of course, the concept of debt anchors *Debt* (2011b), and while Graeber's research is extensive and his arguments are compelling, what hooked me is his provocative insistence that most of the stories we tell (particularly in economics, history, and other social sciences) are wrong. And not only are they wrong, but there is "not a shred of evidence" (Graeber, 2011b, p. 40) to support many of the hegemonic stories that, in turn, serve to justify the violent structures that shape everyday life. Debt is one such hegemonic and violent story, a concept that, with its trove of ugly feelings and bad affects (Ngai, 2007), manages to elude critical attention in social studies education. For example, in British Columbia's Grade 12 Economic Theory Standards (2018), "Students are expected to know neoclassical economics and theories of markets, including the primacy of markets in determining the supply and demand of goods and services in an economy, money and credit, and interest rates" (pp. 3-4). Here, debt looms large within its omission. After all, it is impossible to discuss "money and credit" and "interest rates" without confronting debt, but the word "debt" is also absent from The Framework's (2013) five pages of K-12 Economics Standards. In my view, this absence is telling; debt, according to Graeber (2011b), is the (largely negative) phenomenon most responsible for the violent inequities between nation states, regular people, and lender institutions like banks and other creditors. Through debt, these inequities are secured and maintained with an iron grip, warping human relations in ways that function on a gargantuan scale. To put it another way, it is not surprising "debt" is not mentioned in provincial or national standards (2013, 2018); it is an economic concept that is both foundational to global capitalism and also shot through with negative connotations that span millennia. And yet, on the flipside, the ugly feelings attached to debt invite conceptual contestations that are provocative and engaging for students.

In *Debt* (2011b), Graeber insists that our society is really a debt society, reflecting "the legacy of war and conquest and slavery (that) has never completely gone away.[4] It is still there, lodged in our most intimate conceptions of honor, property, and even freedom. It is just that we can no longer see that it's there" (p. 164). Following this, Graeber shows how commonsense conceptions of debt have both obscured *and* entrenched oppressive systems of violence. For more than 5,000 years, from China and Italy to medieval India and the United States, debt has been

[4] The average U.S. citizen is in debt more than $96,000, a figure that includes mortgages, credit cards, student loans, and more (Woodward, 2022).

intertwined with our deepest notions of right and wrong, a prevalent fixture in arguments about morality and religion, politics and government (2011b). For Graeber, the conflation of debt with morality, and with words like "sin," "guilt," and "redemption," has produced a landscape that, on the one hand, demonizes debtors (whether individual people or entire nations), and, on the other hand, has managed to quantify debt at a mind-bending scale, making it inescapable and irreproachable. Corrupted, here, is the ability to make a promise, what Graeber (2011b) figures as a basic human relation; as he puts it, a promise is not a promise when we lose the ability to break it—and this is precisely what happens when a promise is quantified and recorded as a debt. What happens instead is a sort of dehumanizing alienation with(in) a quantified lack, a debt that has been robbed of any semblance of intersubjectivity and shared beholdenness. What might have remained, upon another plane, as a promise from one human being to another is twisted into something that exceeds the human sphere, almost divine in its irrevocability.

Crucially, Graeber (2011b) is relentless in connecting historical narratives with the present, what I am framing as a "lived methodology of conceptual contestation," an embodied attitude of critique that transcends abstraction and moves into streets and city squares (in the most literal sense). Graeber's adamant attention to human relations *on the ground*, (with)in the present-future, is emblematic of his work, both as a scholar and teacher-activist. Connecting his conceptual contestation of debt to contemporary regimes of debt like the IMF and the World Bank—institutions, I would argue, we are taught to view as benevolent proponents of development—Graeber (2011a) writes, "Debt is the most efficient means ever created to take relations that are fundamentally based on violence and violent inequity and to make them seem right and moral to everyone concerned" (p. 39). In doing this, Graeber's book turns conventional socioeconomic or historical analysis on its head, looking at debt *not* as a natural, and thereby necessary, phenomenon (akin to how most economists view the rationality of "the market" as the god-like functioning of an invisible hand (Adams, 2022)), but as a construction that twists human relationality in ways that, over time and through its own repetition, makes violence and dehumanization "normal," even moral: *the right thing to do*.

With instructive provocation, Graeber (2011a) wonders why Brazil, Argentina, and other countries were expected to pay their gargantuan debts to the IMF in the early 2000s, a battle over public spending that continues to this day (see Rosario, 2022). In this critical example, Graeber shows how institutions like the IMF and the World Bank have weaponized the feverish morality attached to "debt," to being "a debtor," in order to advance neoliberal policies and gut public spending. Arguing that the IMF is "the most powerful, most arrogant, most pitiless instrument through which neoliberal policies have, for the past 25 years been imposed on the poorer countries of the global South, basically, by manipulating debt" (p. 21), Graeber shows how, in exchange for emergency refinancing, the IMF demands "structural adjustment programs," what means, quite literally, widespread privatization, massive cuts in health care, education, "price supports on food, and endless schemes that allowed foreign capitalists to buy up local resources at firesale prices" (p. 21). This racket continues (recent "negotiations" between Pakistan and the IMF are just one example, see The Economist, 2023); moreover, IMF policies are passively accepted as the norm, as commonsense, a discourse that saturates publications like *The New York Times* and *The Economist* and, in turn, the perceptions and attitudes of the public—not only their assumptions regarding *debt* and *debtors*, but also the deep moral judgements (and the implications of those judgments) entangled with both signifiers. It is important, then, that in articulating his critique of the IMF and the World Bank, Graeber (2011a, 2011b) does not provide an "objective" genealogy of the concept of "debt" (a ubiquitous genre of scholarship in the social sciences); rather, he offers

a more provocative, generative pathway of critical inquiry, a pathway that is attentive to praxis and wary of grand theorizing, showing not only why commonsense perceptions of debt (and the affects attached to debtors) come to matter, but also, at the same time, revealing how debts can be abandoned and oppressive regimes constituted by debt (like the IMF and the World Bank) can be destroyed. Again, for Graeber, the matter at hand is always connected to direct action, to the lived-ness of conceptual contestation—how pluralistic (and often disharmonious) coalitions can unite to respond to harm and then disperse, again and again, always asking: What are *our* next steps?[5]

Instructively, and pivoting back towards economics education and civics education, the lived-ness of Graeber's conceptual contestation was secured by his direct involvement in the global justice movement and other direct civic actions. Graeber's diaristic accounts of IMF protests in the early-2000s (Graeber, 2007) became an embodied, lived methodology of conceptual contestation substantiated via authentic, radical movements on the ground. I offer Graeber's pairing of conceptual critique with direct actions as one authentic example of what it means to embody an attitude of critique, to live one's methodology, and I offer *conceptual contestation* as a generative future pathway for social studies education.

For example, recent scholarship (Levinson & Levine, 2013; Muetterties et al., 2022) has centered "informed civic action" in P-12 schools, and this is admirable work. However, and as I have argued elsewhere (see Nelson & Segall, 2022), it is essential that the *concepts* undergirding *all teacher and student actions* are critically interrogated. Otherwise, the conceptual stagnation that characterizes the hegemonic discourses in our field—discourses that are saturated with the "monoculture of neoliberalism" (Ross & Gibson, 2007)—will be furthered, not challenged. Indeed, classroom efforts to facilitate informed civic action (Levinson & Levine, 2013) can, absent critical conceptual contestation, serve to strengthen a status quo awash in concepts that have been stripped of their radical potentialities, and well-intentioned inquiry can miss critical opportunities to reimagine what is possible: *both* the work of (re)infusing concepts with radical potentialities *and also* moving into the streets with one another.

Informed Civic Action or Revolution? Theorizing the Affectivity of a Concept

Digging deeper, here, I want to offer "informed civic action" as an instructive example of a phrase that, through its ubiquitous presence in standardized curriculum and social studies discourses, has been drained of its disruptive potentialities. However, and herein lies one aim of conceptual contestation; it is *also* a phrase readily available for generative reconceptualizations—a phrase that can be critically deconstructed and reimagined by teachers and students. Or tossed aside and replaced. Whatever *they* decide to *do*. This is because every concept is a vessel, a container filled with varied swirls of meanings and affects. One word *feels* differently than another word, and while the affectivity of a word is experienced at a subjective level, there are broader, societal affects produced by particular words. Indeed, the state and other institutions, like schools,

[5] I offer this brief, incomplete story of the IMF as a critical alternative to the commonsense, neoliberal debt-speak that dominates economic discourses. I urge readers to spend five minutes on the IMF's website (www.imf.org); it will quickly become apparent how the immoral specter of "debt" continues to haunt particular nation states. As Graeber (2011a) put it, "In the world of international politics, economic laws are only held to be binding on the poor" (p. 21), and so, as one scans the website, debt-language is everywhere, and readers might be gladdened to see that, out of the graciousness of their hearts, the IMF Executive Board decided to provide debt relief for monies lent during the Covid-19 pandemic to some of the poorest countries on Earth (Georgieva, 2020).

choose certain words *because* words matter. Words make real cuts in the world—the violent materializations of discourse (Barad, 2007).

For instance, Massumi (2005) points out that in a post-9/11 U.S., the President, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other officials warn of "Threat," not "A Situation." Governmentality molded itself to "Threat" after 9/11 because, as Massumi explains, "A threat is unknowable. If it were known in its specifics…it would be a situation, and a situation can be handled. A threat is only a threat if it retains an indeterminacy" (p. 35). Massumi's example highlights how the affectivity of a single word opens up entirely *other* pathways of possible future actions. (With the example of "Threat," the opportunity for state power to wage unending war against an indeterminate enemy.). Likewise, in public schools inundated with neoliberal values, words and phrases like "Strategic Planning," "Data Utilization," "Learning Objectives," and "Student Outcomes" proliferate *instead of* "Student Joy," "Curiosity," or "Emancipation," to name just a few.

And similarly, via its ubiquity in standardized discourses, "informed civic action" feels differently from alternative concepts like "protest," "rebellion," or even "revolution." I suggest that in its coopted, reduced state, "informed civic action" implies *individual* "civic actions" like "writing a letter to your Congressperson" or engaging in acts of volunteerism that fail to engage with the political (the *actual* systems that perpetuate violent inequities). In my view, "informed civic action" has been largely appropriated by neoliberalism; it is a phrase well-suited for "civic actions" that are individualized, rational, and calculated—through this, the possibility of "civic action" being collective is silently foreclosed upon. It is Standards-speak; a line of scripture lifted straight from the inner sanctum of neoliberalism. A concept *already* at capacity with affects of weary conformity. We can envision the rubric; the bleary-eyed student-as-technocrat using "data-driven approaches" to make an informed decision upon the vast grid that is our market-world. Social studies inquiry invested in the measurement and maintenance of the status quo. Indeed, by considering the affectivity of concepts, words, and phrases, I suggest the phrase "informed civic action" gives itself away. We *already feel* its meanings, its implied commitments to safe, largely meaningless volunteerism cloaked as "civic action." As it stands, there is nothing about "informed civic action" that signals disruption.

Concepts like "protest," "revolution," or "rebellion" are constituted by different affects. Palpable electricity; dangerous potentialities; unpredictable outcomes. Writing from the barricades in Seattle in 1999, Graeber (2007) positioned the conceptual affectivity of rebellion as crucial to the direct actions of the global justice movement, a glimpse of how the concepts we employ matter—foreclosing or opening up future actions and possibilities. Graeber conceptualized "rebellion" as "a form of resistance…meant to prefigure the genuinely free society one wishes to create. Revolutionary action is not a form of self-sacrifice, a grim dedication to doing whatever it takes to achieve a future world of freedom. It is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free" (p. 378). Here, rebellion is rendered as a communal lifestyle; ways of being, knowing, and feeling that are necessarily embodied—a defiant refusal of the negative affects being constantly overproduced by the state and other institutions. To live within rebellion is to be radically joyful and free; not joy paired with sentimental happiness, but joy that thrives alongside authentic collective movements, ushering forth from "acting as if one is already free," ways of living that are necessarily communal and beholden to one another. Rebellion cannot be a solitary act.

To reiterate, the concepts we *choose* to use in our work as social studies teachers and teacher educators matters. Words matter. And whether teachers, teacher educators, and their students deconstruct a phrase like "informed civic action" and redeem it, repairing it to its full,

disruptive potential, or discard it in favor of concepts like protest, revolution, or rebellion, the crucial point is that critical, conceptual contestations must work alongside direct action(s). In no small way it is the habitual re-use of overly-familiar concepts that limits the imaginative possibilities students might uncover in classrooms.

To conclude this section, I position Graeber's lived methodology of conceptual contestation as just one example of what Lynn Fendler (personal communication, March 1, 2019) calls a methodological lifestyle, an approach to research and inquiry that asks: What kind of methodological lifestyle do you want to live? Following Shahjahan (2020), conceiving of methodology as a lifestyle allows for ways of being to shape ways of knowing, a critical rejection of research as linear, non-subjective, and decidedly separate from everyday life. I view the lived-ness of Graeber's methodology of conceptual contestation to be particularly relevant to critical social studies education. I ask, What would it mean for social studies teachers and teacher educators to invite their students to engage in similarly-lived methods of conceptual contestation that are *also* critically disruptive? So far, I have aimed to demonstrate just a few ways in which such conceptual shifts do not require a massive overhaul on the part of the teacher; in following Graeber, beginning with conceptual contestation, students' imaginations can be opened up.

In the next section, I focus on democracy (a concept that has always been contested), and I show how Graeber's contestation of democracy—a unique reconceptualization that draws from historical narratives and is also anchored by direct actions—can open up new possibilities for how democracy is rendered in social studies classrooms.

Reclaiming the Dangerous Potentialities of Democracy in Social Studies Education

As Americans prepared to vote in the 2022 midterm elections, an existential warning became prevalent: Democracy in the United States was at stake (Biden, 2022; Leonhardt, 2022; Nichols, 2022; Strassel, 2022). Campaigning for Democratic Party candidates in Arizona, former President Obama warned, "Democracy, as we know it, may not survive in Arizona. That's not an exaggeration. That is a fact" (quoted in Cillizza, 2022, para. 2), and in a speech one week before Election Day, President Biden (2022) encouraged Americans to stand up for democracy, highlighting recent political violence (e.g., the attempted kidnapping of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and subsequent attack of her husband) and the long list of 2020 election deniers on ballots across the country, a point the President emphasized by quoting his predecessor: "Just find me 11,780 votes" (Trump, 2021, para. 18). To further raise the stakes, the House Democratic Whip James Clyburn suggested a Republican victory might lead to the end of the world before conceding it would simply mark the end of American democracy. "Democracy will be ending. The world will continue to exist. The world was here before Hitler and the world was here after Hitler" (Clyburn, 2022).

Meanwhile, while prominent Democrats employed "democracy" as a rallying cry, the GOP and others on the right framed "democracy" as the problem (Beauchamp, 2021). In Montana, a state long-known for its resistance to GOP groupthink (Streep, 2023), the state treasurer called "Montana's Constitution a 'socialist rag' and state representative John Fuller stated, 'Democracy has failed as miserably as socialism'" (para. 3). In Arizona, most references to "democracy" at GOP campaign rallies doubled as a slur for Democrats (Draper, 2022), and in covering the Party's midterm campaigns in the state, Draper (2022) wrote, "The anti-democracy and anti-'democracy' [sic] sentiment, repeatedly voiced over the course of my travels through Arizona, is distinct from

anything I have encountered in over 20 years of covering conservative politics" (para. 10). Indeed, the GOPs distrust of "democracy" is deep-seated. Following World War II, the spectral threat of *actual* democracy appearing was likened to Soviet Communism or, even worse, anarchism, and Republican politicians parroted a comforting line to their largely white supporters, the vigilant managers of the status quo: The United States is a republic, *not* a democracy (Draper, 2022). Since the United States' "Founding Fathers," the appearance of *actual* democracy has terrified wealthy white elites—the nightmarish possibility that a majority of the population could vote to rectify an ever-widening wealth gap (Graeber, 2013).[6] And while this rhetoric was briefly quieted by President George W. Bush's global wars on terrorism—rogue state aggression justified by at least one simple pretense—"the spread of democracy" (Derrida, 2005; Draper, 2022; Graeber, 2007)—following President Trump and the events of January 6th, 2021, the Party's hatred of "democracy" has crystallized, coalescing into a self-assured Party platform.

On the one hand, wealthy elites hate democracy because it possesses the potential to jeopardize their uninterrupted access to power and continued accumulation of wealth. Again, this hatred of democracy—a hatred steeped in a fear of "the people," the masses, the multitude—has a rich legacy on the right (Graeber, 2007). But on the other hand, the poor and largely white supporters of populists like Trump are *taught* to hate democracy via racist discourses constituted by white supremacy, a dizzying collection of conspiratorial illusions that begin with the refusal of election results but stem from a deeper fear of democracy's foundational demand: to live amidst difference with(in) a pluralistic society. Problematically, the very idea of a commons dooms white supremacy. And so, media terms like "The Big Lie" obfuscate this darker truth: the election denialism of the GOP transcends the inept antics of the Trump Administration. Unifying wealthy elites with a populist surge from beneath, election denialism is the logical outgrowth of the anti-democratic commitments of the Party. The hatred of democracy is one of the core tenets of the GOP. Or, to put it another way, the GOP hates democracy because democracy is the Black activist; democracy is the Socialist; democracy is the transgender student athlete; democracy is the unionized worker, the lazy pensioner (Lepore, 2023). Following this, calls for a "postliberal order" have proliferated. Described as a constitutional monarchy sanctified by Christianity and ruled by an "American Caesar" (Ahmari, 2021; Douthat, 2021; Linker, 2021; Yarvin, 2021), the right's "revolt against democracy" (Beauchamp, 2021, para. 1) mirrors similar swings in Europe and elsewhere, and it is a sentiment that extends beyond party elites and conservative thinkers like Patrick Deneen (2018, 2023) and Adrian Vermeule (2022). Neither intellectually coherent nor unified, it is a vision of a society rife with fear and threat, a paranoid politics intolerant of pluralism, obsessed with normative Christian "family values," and suspicious of anyone who does not embody white, cisgender, Christian heteronormativity.

Taken together, it is evident our sociopolitical landscape is infected with hate, with a burgeoning resolution to reject human difference. And yet, I suggest that *within this* we can glimpse democracy's still-radical potentialities, it's ongoing *value* as a concept: Even as Democratic politicians talk about "democracy" in decidedly appropriated, neoliberal forms, its disruptive kernel remains, potentialities that are highlighted by the GOP's hatred of the concept and what it portends. In my view, the GOP's hatred of democracy ought to strengthen our

[6] To quote James Madison, "Where a majority are united by a common sentiment, and have an opportunity, the rights of the minor party become insecure" (see Farrand, 1937, p. 547). By "rights," Madison likely means the right to accumulate vast amounts of wealth via systemically violent means (Graeber, 2013).

commitments to working towards a democracy that is always to-come (Derrida, 2005), shared practices capable of changing a society that feels entrenched by its own reproduction.

My larger point, here, is not to present a tidy summation of a complex and often contradictory political landscape. Rather, I am aiming to show how the realization of a democracy to-come never stops. Democracy requires work; moreover, much of this work is conceptual, meaning that living democratically requires our collective imaginings of what a democracy to-come might be like and feel like for everyone.[7] Within this, possibilities are infinite. Again, we can see how conceptual contestation and clarity must be entangled with subsequent actions. Indeed, one irony of the present is that a system misnamed "democracy" has confused Americans on both the left and right, fueling a justified rage at a "system" that is, at its core, antagonistic to democracy's tenets: rather than a shared commons, privatization and neoliberal austerity; rather than equality, an economic system that generates a few winners, many losers, and a violent gap between the two; rather than collective participation, a major Party (the GOP) invested in disenfranchising voters while apathy and individualism permeate society at large. In short, the promises of an actual democracy—as lived, as practiced—might be redeemed by critical educators.

Reconceptualizing Democracy: A Collective, Ongoing Effort

The Democratic Party exceeded expectations in the 2022 midterm elections, moving elites like David Brooks (2022) to proclaim, "the fever (of Trump's hold over the Party) is breaking" (para. 1). Needless to say, it is evident Brooks and others were wrong. As I write this in late 2023, Trump is the leading GOP candidate for the 2024 Presidential Election and recent polls have shown him running ahead of President Biden (Goldmacher, 2023). And still, having avoided the disaster scenarios sketched by Obama, Clyburn, and President Biden, Americans returned, post-midterms, to the same "tremulous condition" (McClaren, 2017, p. xiii), a society in which the "edifice of our democratic traditions remains shifting and uncertain, on the brink of collapse" (McClaren, 2017, p. xiii). And so, on the one hand, Democrats in the U.S. have emerged as the defenders of democracy, even as the Party kowtows to corporate interests and austerity policy, waging a war on "democratic values" (e.g., equality, a commons) in their own way. On the other hand, the GOP appears to be done with democracy, particularly "democratic outcomes" that figure GOP as a loser.

Since the election of Trump in 2016, scholarship on liberal democracy and its future in the U.S. and elsewhere has proliferated, a trend that increased following the Covid-19 pandemic and the January 6th Capitol insurrection (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019, 2023; Manville & Ober, 2023; Richardson, 2023). As a matter of course, I am using Graeber's theorizations of democracy as a jumping off point, but the visions of democracies to-come I offer do not aim to be totalizing imperatives. Following Mouffe (2009), the pluriverse that is our shared world suggests that our acceptance of "a diversity of political forms" rather than "the enforcement of a universal model" (p. 561) is more conducive to peace. In my view, this is an approach that would sit well with Graeber the anarchist and activist—his commitments to democracy's

[7] In my reading, this is Derrida's precise point: democracy is always to-come in its ideal (an ideal that will never fully arrive), but it is the present-future practices that strive to realize democracy that come to matter (see Derrida, 2005).

communal coalescence are inherently relational and contingent upon compromise, not arbitrary authority or the implementation of rules from above.

For Graeber, democracy is always to-come and necessarily *lived*, an ever-unfolding and hopeful project that demands a critical attendance to issues of power and authority, identity and agency (Brown, 2019; Derrida, 2005; Giroux, 2019, 2022; Graeber, 2007; Ross, 2017; Shenk & Brown, 2015). But the dissonance between any ideal "democracy," as defined by Wolin (2000), for example, as "equalizing, participatory, and commonalizing" (p. 20), and the sociopolitical landscape in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere is alarming. Indeed, as calls from elected politicians on the right to subvert democracy multiply (Draper, 2022), *lived* democratic projects of struggle and contestation can be more difficult to locate (Chait, 2022; Giroux, 2019). To put it another way, it is remarkable that, as undemocratic as the United States is in many ways—particularly when compared to Wolin's (2000) ideal—it remains too democratic for an authoritarian right (Chait, 2022).

Moreover, the infiltration of neoliberalism across society has only compounded democracy's decline. Following Ross and Gibson (2007), in a neoliberal society guided by market values, wherein the worth of a human being, an education, an animal, or an idea (like democracy), is determined according to economic metrics, Wolin's (2000) offering of what a substantive democracy could look like (equalizing, participatory, commonalizing) is out of touch to the point of absurdity, appearing "anachronistic (and) dyssynchronous." The crux of the problem, Wolin (2000, p. 20) argues, is that "high-technology, globalized capitalism is radically incongruent with democracy" (p. 20), an insight Giroux (2019) also emphasizes by arguing that capitalism is antithetical to democracy, full stop. In Wolin's (2000) view, politicians and other elites, on both the left and right, periodically douse the public with "the rhetoric of democracy" during election season, assuring the mass population "that democracy is the condition to which all progressive-minded societies should aspire" (p. 20). (Although, as recent shifts within the U.S. sociopolitical landscape demonstrate, it appears the right has adopted new anti-democracy tactics.) And yet, this seasonal pageantry disguises an uncomfortable fact: the rhetoric of democracy is a tool of "constraint and neutralization…it is, necessarily, regressive. Democracy is embalmed in public rhetoric precisely in order to memorialize its loss of substance" (p. 20). I suggest that Wolin's provocation, here, his radical insight, is to figure democracy as a weapon of its own suppression. Democracy, conceived of as the equitable flourishing of all people upon the commons (2000), terrifies elites on both the left and right—the hoarders of wealth and land, the vampires of working lives, the diligent managers of systemic violence (Graeber, 2013). Indeed, the radical potential here is that democracy could capsize the status quo: A neoliberal order functioning beneath a sheen of rationality, technocratic expertise, and data-driven decision making; A market-obsessed system that turns every life into a number that can be extended via the biopower of the state; Each life exploited to the fullest, sapped of its affect and agentic potential by the exhausting demands of just getting by (Berlant, 2011; Foucault, 1995). In this figuring, democracy becomes—in a most generative sense—radically incommensurable with Arizonans or Michiganders voting in a midterm election. Voting for a particular candidate—an act framed (and praised) as a defense of democracy becomes, when viewed from a more critical vantage point, a maintenance of a violently inequitable status quo, a glimpse of how neoliberalism and its bipartisan henchmen have succeeded in gutting the commons, robbing the public for private interests, and limiting our imaginations of how life could *be* and *feel* otherwise.

Graeber, Democracy, and Social Studies Education

Following this, one of Graeber's (2007) most generative provocations is his argument that the paradoxical appropriations and calculated misuses of "democracy" I have detailed above can be distilled into one fatal error: the enduring belief that "democracy," as it has been conceptualized and lived "pretty much anywhere" (p. 331) for millennia, can be reconciled with coercive state power. Needless to say, disrupting the pairing of democracy with state power would pose problems for The Framework (2013), wherein "democracy" is always attached to qualifiers: "Constitutional democracy," "democratic processes," and so on. Graeber's (2007, 2011a) articulation of this conceptual contestation is filled with affectivity; drawing from history, anthropology, and archaeology, the interdisciplinary examples he provides are surprising, exciting, and moving. Or, to put it another way, the alternative stories he tells brim with a sort of rogue vibrancy. Running contrary to the familiar myths we tell one another about democracy (e.g., The connect-the-dots origin story running from democracy's first appearance in ancient Greece to the pens of "founding fathers" of "Western democracies" in the 18th and 19th centuries), Graeber's vignettes show how democracy appears and then disperses, appearances that do not coincide with the creation of a government, for example, but (and this point is quite radical) in the very *absence* of coercive state power, what he calls "the spaces in between" (p. 331). And so, what emerges is not a cynical or negative critique but a generative demonstration of how democracy has been, and is being, practiced in diverse ways across borders and beneath state structures. With regards to social studies education (and more specifically, citizenship education), the possibilities offered by Graeber's conceptual contestation are numerous, both for how students might begin to conceptualize democracy as separate—even antithetical to state power—and then also how students can practice democracy themselves in classrooms, schools, and broader communities.

Spaces of Democratic Improvisation

In Graeber's view, we [8] are not experiencing a crisis of democracy; rather, it is state power itself that is in crisis. Nation state republics (e.g., the United States, Canada), having maintained limited "democratic elements" (p. 332), have been weakened by decades of capitulation to the market and global corporations. Or, to put it another way, the neoliberal solution has been "to declare the market the only form of public deliberation one really needs, and to restrict the state almost exclusively to its coercive function" (p. 367). At the same time, in recent years "there has been a massive revival of interest in democratic practices and procedures within global social movements," and, crucially, these movements have "proceeded almost entirely outside of statist frameworks" (p. 332). Graeber argues "the future of democracy lies precisely in this area" (p. 332), "the spaces in between" (p. 331). Indeed, in Graeber's view, the very conception of the state is antithetical to democracy because states are a way of organizing violence. Citing the anti-globalization movement and the Zapatistas in Chiapas as two recent examples, Graeber argues "the democratic state was always a contradiction. Globalization has simply exposed the rotten underpinnings by creating the need for decision-making structures on a planetary scale where any attempt to maintain the pretense of popular sovereignty, let alone participation, would be obviously absurd" (p. 367). It is beneath the state, then, that "spaces of democratic improvisation" (p. 362)

[8] It is crucial to note, here, that Graeber's (2007) "we" is always a generous and inclusive "we," in the sense that constructed divisions like nationality limit "decentralized forms of consensus-based direct action" (p. 329).

can emerge, situations in which "a jumbled amalgam of people, most with at least some initial experience of methods of communal self-governance, find themselves in new communities outside the immediate supervision of the state" (p. 362). Added to this, it is not as though improvisational communities of self-governance are bound to reappropriate the familiar mechanisms of coercive state.

In Chiapas, the Zapatistas "abandoned the notion that revolution is a matter of seizing control over the coercive apparatus of the state, instead proposing to refound democracy in the self-organization of autonomous communities" (p. 367). For Graeber, intentional refusals like these demonstrates a "return" of democracy to "the spaces in which it originated: the spaces in between" (p. 367), spaces beneath the violent structures of the state. It is crucial to note, here, that "the spaces in between" can be difficult to locate in the past-present because of the totalizing role of the state in the production of knowledge and subjects. What I mean, here, is that the state—and the elites invested with state power—are invariably entangled with interpretations of the past via numerous disciplines, from history and archaeology to anthropology and sociology. In this sense, the state is the gatekeeper, rendering practices and ways of being within the body politic legible or illegible, a point that is now-familiar within critical social studies education and history education discourses (Segall et al., 2006). In other words, as human beings have been around for 300,000 years—inevitably experimenting and improvising with *how* to live with one another in ways we cannot possibly know in total—any "history" of how human beings have structured lives and reproduced societies and practices is limited and incomplete, full stop. Following this, most "histories" also represent the very existence of the state *qua* natural, a leap that obscures well-hidden democratic practices — "procedures of egalitarian decision-making" (p. 335) — while perpetuating the assumption that state-sanctioned republics represent the culmination of democracy's possibilities.

While there is an intellectual humility inherent to the former approach (an approach that can be spotted as another through line uniting Graeber's work), the latter is constituted by affects of social science braggadocio. Indeed, it is the dominant approach, spawning an entire genre of history tomes that render an inchoate past as pinned down and explained—a linear story that explains not only how we arrived at our current predicaments but also why certain alternatives are neither possible nor advisable. It is a line of reasoning that says, "If there is no direct evidence for something, it can be treated as if it does not exist. This seems especially inappropriate when dealing with early antiquity, an enormous landscape on which archaeology and linguistics can at best throw open a few tiny windows" (Graeber, 2007, p. 361). To put it another way, do we really believe the invention of farming 12,000 years ago kickstarted a deterministic chain reaction of agriculture, labor, hierarchy, arbitrary power, and inequality we simply cannot escape? If the answer is yes, are labor and dominance and wealth accumulation essences of the human condition? Here, the discipline of history is at its most conservative, a discourse used to dampen the imagination of what might be, of how we might live otherwise.

On the flipside, I suggest there is an affective value attached to what I will call a humble openness to *not knowing*; my provocation, here, is that in history education we might consider a meditative practice of this sort—a pedagogical allowance for the vastness of human history, the fact that we actually know very little about what was occurring, on a planetary scale, for millennia (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). To be clear, this is not an appeal for ignorance. I am not offering a pedagogical aim that moves backwards from the construction of knowledge—the collective search for truth that is teaching and learning. Rather, this might be a humble shift in practice that stems

from my interest in what new relations and future possibilities might be disclosed via an openness in social studies education to what we do not know and thus what might have been (and could be) as opposed to the dominant approach to historical inquiry—we know what we know because of the evidence we can cite to support a claim (despite the fact that all evidence and claims are themselves contingent and ever-evolving).

In other words, and as I begin to conclude, what I am envisioning are small ontological and affective shifts in how the past, the present, and possible futures are rendered in social studies classrooms, moving away from the determinism of social science towards styles of social studies pedagogy that are deliberately open to practices of creative speculation and collaborative imaginings. For Graeber (2007), questions of ontology are critically entangled with our perceptions of "reality," and any subsequent politics is entangled with how we conceptualize the past and our relation to it (and to one another). Again, throughout this essay, I have aimed to show how social studies teachers might contest some of the concepts foundational to social studies (e.g., democracy, debt), concepts that too often escape critical (and potentially generative) reconceptualizations.

Conclusion

Above, I characterized Graeber's oeuvre and direct actions as an activist and teacher as a lived methodology of conceptual contestation. This essay has aimed to demonstrate how Graeber's writing, ideas, and actions offer numerous pathways for critical educators (of any field or discipline) to explore and take up. A second aim of this essay was to (re)center imagination and possibilities in social studies education, what Graeber (2007) describes as "a political ontology of the imagination" (p. 406). He contrasts a political ontology of the imagination with the dominant ontology that structures everyday life, what "realists" refer to casually as "political reality," the way things are. Graeber calls this is a political ontology of violence, an assumption that

> ultimate reality is one of forces, with 'force' here largely a euphemism for various technologies of physical coercion. To be a 'realist' in international relations, for example, has nothing to do with recognizing material realities—in fact, it is all about attributing 'interests' to imaginary entities known as 'nations'—but about willingness to accept the realities of violence. Nation-states are real because they can kill you. Violence here really is what defines situations. (p. 406)

It follows, then, that standardized social studies curriculum can, quite easily, perpetuate a political ontology of violence, in so far as students are made passive receivers of a past-present that is handed down to them, a technocratic circularization of how things *are* and an avoidance of interrogation and critical contestation.

But of course, critical social studies educators have worked to disrupt the ontology of violence in diverse ways for decades, and this is how it ought to be. There is no single method for teaching critically (nor should there be) and efforts to destabilize regimes of power and transform a status quo that feels beyond entrenched will look differently from classroom to classroom, student to student. And so, this essay participates in this collaborate effort, theorizing the potentialities of (re)centering imagination and possibilities in social studies education, projects that are less about giving power to the imagination than they are in "recognizing that the imagination is the source of power in the first place" (p. 407).

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