**[Review of David Graeber’s “Debt: The First 5,000 Years”](http://www.monetary.org/review-of-david-graebers-debt-the-first-5000-years/2013/01" \o "Permanent Link to Review of David Graeber’s \“Debt: The First 5,000 Years\”)**

*On January 14, 2013, in* [*Book Reviews*](http://www.monetary.org/category/book-reviews)*, by AMI*

Reviewed by Robert Poteat, AMI Researcher

**“The book is worth reading and will aid anyone to understand that the evolution of money as settlement of debt and its conversion to debt is far more complicated than a simple solution to barter with bits of precious metal.”**

The book is 594 pages that include 391 pages of anthropological discourse on credit, debt, and money in 12 chapters, 59 pages of footnotes, and an extensive bibliography is included as well as index.

The cover leaf dispenses with the myth of money originating as a solution to barter with…”not a shred of evidence to support it.” Text of the book reveals many variations of credit/debt/money relations in primitive as well as modernized societies from 3500 BC to 2011 CE.  
The first written language was cuneiform from Sumer that began approximately 3500 BC. Baked clay tablets written in cuneiform reveal that money power was the prerogative of the temples that served as civil authority. The clay tablets reveal an extensive system of credits/debts as means of exchange as well as some coinage of metals. Interest, or usury, had already been invented. Any attempts to explain origins of money before the invention of writing must be speculation.

The author examines a number of undeveloped societies that operated on various systems of credits and debts, and examines the social relations of these systems. Social relations in small communities relied heavily on the dishonor of not paying one’s debts. This attitude still prevails in modern society.

A strong case is made that money was invented to pay debts or enable immediate settlement of exchange with someone with whom there was not expected to be any further association. In many cases, a coin acted as a token or counter rather than being valuable in itself. A good argument is made that precious metals were adapted to coinage to assist armies in procurement of arms, armament, and equipment in far off places. Precious metals are portable and are nearly universally recognized as having price value.

The author concludes in Chapter 6, page 164: “If we have become a debt society, it is because the legacy of war, conquest, and slavery has never completely gone away.” Government debt to private parties has been used to manipulate and corrupt government for private ends, particularly, in the present debt paradigm called capitalism. Debt has been used to degrade everything including human lives to a monetary calculation that eliminates all social obligations to each other. This is especially observable in the later development of capitalism that has  
reduced society to a system of practical debt slavery.

The author offers no solutions except a weak suggestion of debt forgiveness.

As a matter of opinion, the book, as an anthropological study, did not give enough consideration to the power assumed by entities, temples, kings, governments, etc., to control society through control of money. This was already evident in Sumerian clay tablets and has evolved into the present private central bank monopolies that are the greatest concentration of wealth through debt in human history.

The book is worth reading and will aid anyone to understand that the evolution of money as settlement of debt and its conversion to debt is far more complicated than a simple solution to barter with bits of precious metal.