

Antipode

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Book Review Symposium

James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780691155296 (cloth); ISBN: 9780691161037 (paper)

Author's response

As a scholar, one is always appreciative whenever one's colleagues take the time and trouble to read your work thoughtfully and offer critical appraisals. Johnnie Crossan, Simon Springer and Stephen Healy have all done me that large favor for which I am grateful. The reciprocity involved in this exchange, they would all recognize, partakes of the kind of mutuality among equals to which anarchists aspire but rarely achieve. That too is something to be grateful for.

I will forego patting myself on the back for the nice things they have to say about my book (for which I am also grateful) and turn instead to our comradely differences recognizing that in the larger scheme of things, these differences are minor; we are, I am confident, likely to find ourselves on the same side of the barricades 98% of the time, though we might quarrel about exactly why we were there.

Crossan thinks I revel too much in what I call "everyday forms of resistance" (e.g. foot-dragging, poaching, desertion, insubordination). I believe I am right to revel for two reasons. First, such resistance is habitually overlooked as trivial when, in fact, it was the most common form of opposition historically until quite recently. Second, its consequences have been far from trivial: desertion has brought down armies and regimes, poaching has successfully contested formal property rights for centuries, and I would go so far as to say that the indifferent work of

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millions under state socialism had a great deal to do with the eventual demise of the Soviet bloc. The aggregation of petty acts can have mighty effects once they reach certain thresholds.

I agree completely with Crossan that anarchism involves the “institution of an order with protocols and rules”. This points to a crucial distinction between social pressure in a society of equals and coercive pressure by either states or propertied power or both. We may resent the pressure of our neighbors who expect us to mow our lawns or dress in a certain way or hold “proper views”. As long as our neighbors don’t have the whip hand, this is the kind of social pressure that we can, if we can muster the courage, stare down; but it is ubiquitous and order-producing. I don’t think an anarchist can or would want to eliminate social pressure of this kind though he or she might want to divert it in a new direction. Such pressure, however, is radically different than having to conform to the wishes of a state that can beat or imprison you or to factory bosses or landlords who can determine whether you can feed your family or not.

I would argue, on the basis of my reading extensively about acephalous (anarchic) societies of swiddeners, foragers and hunters that anarchist order is even compatible with certain forms of command. Most such societies endorse temporary authoritarian leadership in war, in the hunt, in vital rituals, and in negotiations with dangerous outsiders. Such leadership depends on wide recognition of an individual’s experience, wisdom, skill, and judgment; it is temporary, and it is not, in principle, inherited. One might call this the necessary management of socially recognized and temporary inequalities. What anarchists cannot accept is any form of power that holds a pistol (literally or metaphorically) at your temple to compel compliance based on political power, property, or inherited status.

Simon Springer writes a lot of nice things about my work—making me blush, but in a “good way”—and then he gets down to the business of taking me to task for being a fake or, at

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least, inconsistent anarchist. The first retort that comes to mind is: “Well, of course, why do you think I called the book *Two Cheers for Anarchism* rather than *Three Cheers?*”.

He objects to my portrayal of the federalized national guard leading black schoolchildren to school in Little Rock, Arkansas through racist mobs as a rare “emancipatory moment” and observes, correctly, that at such junctures “there is always and inevitably a larger strategy of control in mind”. Yes, of course, but that is just the point. Aside from assuming that the state is always of “one mind”, Springer, I think, misses the fact that such moments typically occur precisely when the state fears it is losing control altogether and takes unprecedented measures to regain control, which, in this case, meant enforcing school integration. The goal was control but the only means to that goal (thanks largely to agitation from below) was integration. Take the larger case of the U.S. Civil War: I would agree that the goal was the promotion of capitalist accumulation and industry in the North but the only means to that end, in these circumstances, was the emancipation of the slaves. Yes, when Reconstruction ended, racism returned with a vengeance but emancipation would not have been on the table in the first place without a half century of abolitionist campaigns.

Those very rare emancipatory moments when states are compelled for reasons of self-preservation to give ground are always contaminated in this way. It is claimed with some truth that the Kennedys were persuaded to support the Civil Rights Act in large part because they thought we were losing the Cold War propaganda war with the Soviet Union who could portray the U.S. as a racist society.

I have a question for Springer. Martin Luther King Jr. and many of the civil rights activists who supported “civil disobedience” believed that in breaking the law publicly and collectively, they were *bound to accept arrest and imprisonment* as a mark of their acceptance of civil authority and a token of their occupation of the moral high-ground. Springer’s logic would

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have to classify this as “false-consciousness” but I would rather see it as a dramatic and strategic move (not insincere) designed to win over public opinion. A comprehensive rejection of a “law-regarding” civil disobedience and violent resistance to arrest jail would have failed Springer’s test of anarchist consciousness and would, of course, also have failed utterly as a political tactic.

Springer objects, as I know many others will, to my defense of the petty bourgeoisie. I had especially in mind artisans, small-holding peasants, petty hawkers and shop-keepers who do not hire labor. I fully appreciate, as Springer emphasizes, that they are, in principle, petty capitalists and that most of them aspire, if possible, to become big capitalists. But the historical fact is that despite their dreams only a miniscule fraction ever become “big”, and throughout their life they work for what would translate as poverty wages. What they do have, however, is some control over their working day, their petty enterprise, and this gives them the tiny bit of autonomy, freedom - characteristics at the center of anarchist values! - and standing that, as Jefferson understood, is likely to make them more active and opinionated than those who are under the thumb of a boss. In the case of small-holding cultivators, of course, historically the great majority of the petty bourgeoisie, I would remind Springer that they existed well before anything we might call capitalism proper popped into view. Isn’t it an irony that the artisans and farmers who form much of this class, while disparaged by those who hold the proletariat to be “the” revolutionary class, are, in historical fact, the force behind virtually all the late 18th and 19th century revolutions in the West?

My discussion of schooling doesn’t please Springer either. In this case I am happy to take some of his criticism on board while rejecting his claim that I have made a “calamitous” mistake. I am actually well aware of the literature on “unschooling” and informal schooling and have, as well, written elsewhere about the culture-destroying boarding schools imposed on native Americans, on native Australians, and on the Roma and Sinti in Europe. But it is clear that

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Springer finds me insufficiently anarchist more-or-less across the board and all too willing to find emancipatory moments of resistance where he sees nothing but a growing, looming wall of ever more sophisticated repression. Is the state always really so unified and clever and has resistance from below been always been so negligible? If so, then we might as well resign ourselves to our four walls. It comes back to the “two” in *Two Cheers* which signals the fact that my politics will not ever satisfy Springer’s stringent criteria for membership in the anarchist fraternity. But I repeat that I am sure we would be on the same side of the barricades in almost any struggle you might name.

I do regret that I did not address the classics of anarchism and their modern successors (e.g. Zerzan, Day, Wark, the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection*) with which I am also familiar. But, clearly, it was not that kind of book and it seemed to be a more useful enterprise to follow the example of Colin Ward and relate anarchism to the contemporary struggles and social institutions around us.

Stephen Healy finds more to like in my essay than perhaps it deserves. It is, for sure, as he says a rejection of scientific utopianism and an effort to discern, *de facto*, anarchist principles at work in places we may have overlooked. The struggles and resistances we see around us may not always be entirely consistent, coherent, and ideologically pure, but, as he implies, to endorse and support the possibilities and energy they embody is preferable to standing on the sidelines scolding.

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