

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)

Anarchism is a highly contested political philosophy. Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur (2003: 4) write, “[a]narchist history is a terrain occupied by materialists and mystics, communists and mutualists, nihilists and scientists, progressivists and primitivists alike”. To be sure, many who have claimed the mantle of ‘anarchist’ have missed the point completely, mistaking it for and using it to legitimise all manner of absurd, violent, and exploitative behaviours. Contra a wealth of misreadings, misunderstandings, and deliberate acts of deceit by its detractors, anarchism proper means a society based on mutual aid and mass democratic participation characterised by the absence of domination of human beings over other human beings. If only it were so simple! Anyone who has spent their time in a ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’ or an anarchist influenced Social Centre will have been confronted with a dizzying number of anarchisms: the proponents of many arguing ‘my anarchism is better than your anarchism’¹. For a political idea that values open critical debate this is no bad thing (although some comrades should practice more humility in their debating skills). In my experience as an urban activist of the anarchist sort, individuals fall in and out various anarchisms, never becoming a disciple of one for any great length of time. In the following paragraphs, inspired, in part, by James Scott’s *Two Cheers for*

¹ Here I am paraphrasing the David Rovics’ song ‘I’m a better anarchist than you’.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Anarchism, I'll try and make a case for we anarcho-curious mortals adopting a more concerted approach to anarchist praxis.

Struggle

It is important we show deference to the insubordination of countless poor folk forced to fight in rich men's wars. Scott's account of the impact Confederate deserters had on the outcome of in the American Civil War is insightful and deferential. It reminds us of the brutalities forced upon these men and their loved ones by a class who have long treated common folk as fodder for their warped notion of progress. It is right to celebrate the *small* battles against the impositions of capital and state fought and won on workshop floors and in our neighbourhoods. There is much satisfaction and maybe even comfort to be had reading about the likes of the Parisian taxi drivers who through their use of vernacular knowledge can bring the city's streets to a standstill. As an urban geographer, Scott's treatment of modernism's socio-spatial "absurdities" is particularly appealing. Reminiscent of Richard Sennett's (1970) 'myth of the purified identity' in modern city life and, more recently, John Allen's (2006) notion of the 'seductive logic of ambient power', Scott continues to highlight the base necessity for the capital/state nexus to hold sway in the evolution of urban form. The built environment plays the crucial role of intermediary between the transfer of common assets to the private sector. As intermediary it acts as both the material vehicle through which common wealth is appropriated and cultural channel through which the 'appropriate' signals are transmitted. In other words, "material space gives [neoliberal] ideology currency and serves as its referent" (Lefebvre 1996: 312). It is of vital importance we remember the struggles of those who came before us and equally we reject the logic of contemporary forms of domination that continue to debase common ways of being in the world. However, whilst it feels good to remind

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

each other of our talent for hidden moments of subordination, I feel it is more productive, in terms of moving in the direction of social insurrection and revolution, to explore and experiment with our greater talent for organization? Anarchism is so much more than a politics of struggle and rejection.

Organization

A key theme that runs through various strains of anarchism is a mistrust of institutions. For example, in *Anarchy in Action* Colin Ward (1973: 111) claims “anarchism is hostile to institutions” and “predisposed towards de-institutionalization”. Scott displays similar sentiments, when he, rightly in my view, argues that a “potentially staggering” number of vernacular orders have been lost to the formal institutions of modern society. This anti-institutional position stems from a wider anti-authoritarian ethic within anarchist theory. An anti-authoritarian ethic, while certainly not without merit, is often read as *anti-authority*. This misreading is the root of the common misconception that anarchism equates chaos.

Anarchy is opposed to the *archos* (the political leader) in the sense that it breaks with the logic of the *arche*—the presupposition (or first principle) that a “determinate superiority is exercised over an equally determinate inferiority” (Ranciere 2011: 30). Anarchism, as political praxis, goes beyond a revolt against the supreme power. This form of revolt might be considered the easy part. Far more difficult is to counter the *arche* and its more subtle manifestations of authority that we, each of us, to varying degrees, reproduce everyday in our most mundane interactions. Mikhail Bakunin referred to this less easily identified enemy as the ‘tyranny of the society’. Freedom from this tyranny cannot be given to the individual by a higher power: freedom cannot be mystified. It is a condition—a *material reality*—

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

an ongoing process that emerges from our participation with one another in the ongoing organization of the everyday spaces we inhabit. Process here implies *order*.

Anarchism's organizational rationale, while attempting to construct alternative organizational forms to the top-down command and control processes favoured by mainstream party politics and other societal institutions, must be understood as the institution of an order with protocols and rules. My current research, for example, engages with community garden groups in Glasgow. There are a variety of ways in which these grassroots community growers organize themselves. Those that organize to equalize participation in the decision-making process; de-routinize the division of labour; and, crucially, share their resources (knowledge, skills, produce) with others, are as close to ideal-type anarchism as any group are likely to be. In practicing mutual modes of engagement such as these, participants are impeding the institutionalization of hierarchical structures. This is not to say that within these groups hierarchies do not evolve. On the contrary, individuals and groups are encouraged to take the lead in particular situations, but this comes after a period of learning from others who have experienced taking the lead in similar situations. This is effectively a rotation system and is designed to prevent any form of over-accumulation of individual power: in others words, fixed hierarchies. Through sharing skills and knowledge, participants are equalizing the process of participation. This creates a horizontal mode of engagement that counters the normalization of vertical modes of engagement (employer/employee, leader/followers, ruler/ruled) characteristic of contemporary life. Exploration of *orders* such as these are more useful for anarchist practitioners and scholars than the, certainly inspiring, but now well-versed celebration of humanity's capacity for 'under the radar' disruption—which, at best, has only ever temporarily modified the old barbarities of capital and state domination.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Trans-local Solidarity

The organizational structures mentioned above take place at the local scale. If anarchism is to become more than, to borrow from Ward (1973), ‘a seed beneath the snow’ its practitioners must up-scale the mutual modes of engagement nurtured in their immediate localities. Many of them do just this but many others are wary of the notion of up-scaling. It evokes some form of macro organization that would threaten the autonomy of its component parts. It suggests a level of bureaucracy that most anarchists would be uncomfortable with and it holds the frightening potential of a vanguard of sorts—professional activists who act as liaisons between the component parts. While these are legitimate concerns we must recognize the necessity of extending mutuality beyond the confines of our immediate communities.

Mutual aid, as an ethics of practice in socio-political engagement, is the antithesis of the political culture of the “barracks community” (Hartsock 1982: 283), which promotes competition, hierarchy, and sectarianism. Social encounters, imbued with the logic of mutual aid, begin not with mistrust but, rather, acceptance, and strive to nurture virtues such as love, courage, and solidarity. The concerns we have must be faced head on as we try to create robust networks of solidarity. The emancipatory potential of what Scott refers to as “disorderly, unpredictable, spontaneous action” lies with the ability of *activists* to forge solidaristic trans-local links between one another, thereby countering the authoritarian penchant for separation and competition. Featherstone et al. (2012) call this ‘progressive localism’. If this can be achieved, these disparate experiments in cooperation move from a position of defence, in the sense of being resilient under difficult conditions, towards being productive of new values between places and social groups.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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