

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## *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)

### **The Third Cheer for Anarchism**

James Scott's *Two Cheers for Anarchism* is an insightful contemplation of the everydayness of anarchism, which he considers less in terms of its philosophical traditions, and more as a form of praxis, a forever-unfolding process of space-time. The argument has many resonances with my own work on anarchist geographies (Springer 2012; 2013a; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c), and so from my perspective there is much to celebrate about Scott's latest book. Reflecting on his entire body of work, Scott tells us that it finally dawned on him that "virtually every major successful revolution ended by creating a state more powerful than the one it overthrew, a state that in turn was able to extract more resources from and exercise more control over the very population it was designed to serve", and from this he concludes that an anarchist critique of Marxism is prescient (p.x). Indeed, Scott is in some ways responsible for my own turn towards anarchism, and against the grain of the orthodoxy that Marxism seems to enjoy within contemporary critical geography. Researching the lives of marginalized peoples in Cambodia for over a decade has ensured that Marxism has left a bitter taste in my mouth (Springer 2009; 2010), and Scott's (1985; 1990; 1998) arguments provided me with the notion that there were other emancipatory paths to be found that didn't necessarily mesh with the revolutionary currents of Marxian thought. That Benedict Anderson (2005) has also shown an appreciation for anarchism suggests to me that there is something particularly germane about subaltern lived experiences in Southeast Asia that should point us away from endorsements of revolutionary flashpoints and towards the slow burn of everyday resistance. "Anarchist principles are active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism or

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

anarchist philosophy”, Scott (p.xii) accurately muses, a point that he hit home with dazzling conviction in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Scott 2009). To Scott (p.xxi), anarchism is more a way of being in the world than an ideology, and he contends that forms of “informal cooperation, coordination, and action that embody mutuality without hierarchy are the quotidian experience of most people ... the experience of anarchistic mutuality is ubiquitous”. Lacking what he calls a “comprehensive anarchist worldview”, Scott (p.xii) instead makes the case for an “anarchist squint”, which is actually all one could ever expect, as supposing a singular ideal or universal view for anarchism is a dead letter endeavor from the outset. Anarchism is, after all, the enemy of normativity, not its champion.

In spite of being impressed by the personal flavor of his latest book, and my delight at seeing one of my academic heroes openly embrace a political vision that has been unfairly derided and defamed, I do nonetheless have some critiques of Scott’s latest work. In particular, his contention that in some cases the state can play an emancipatory role doesn’t sit well with me at all. He points to an example from 1957 when the US National Guard led black children to school through a mob of enraged whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, yet I remain skeptical at how emancipatory such action really was. Wouldn’t it be more accurate to suggest that this manoeuvre actually served very particular politics ends? I’m not a scholar of American history by any means, but surely there is more to the story here. In the long haul of history the state is never emancipatory, as there is always and inevitably a larger strategy of control in mind. What purpose does the state serve other than to regulate, to govern, to manage, and, ultimately, to rule? So while we can have moments of seemingly progressive politics, wherein particular identity groups acquire greater autonomy, the entire body of the polity is still patently subject to the whims of sovereign power, which by its very nature is oppressive. Any time we see a state doing ‘good’, we should be asking critical questions about whose interests are being served by this ostensibly ‘public virtue’ (Foucault 1980). The idea that “states might occasionally enlarge the realm of human freedom” (p.xiv) unfortunately takes a limited view of the historical landscape, forgetting that a cage is always and everywhere a cage, regardless of how we might dress it up with comfortable furniture and cozy trimmings. Scott seems to recognize the implicit contradiction of this formulation when

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

he rejects a market fundamentalist view of selling a child as a ‘voluntary choice’, and therefore an act of freedom, but he should have also applied this insight to his remarks about the state, as it too presents us with a logic that is “monstrous”, operating through a “coercive structure ... that impels people into ... catastrophic choices” (p.xv). While the violence of an authoritarian state is overtly obvious, choosing between two or more poor options, as is the case for supposedly ‘democratic’ states, is not indicative of freedom, but rather a false choice that attempts to elicit our capitulation to preset ontological parameters that are intended as unquestionable. The electoral system locks in a mode of ‘politics’ that encourages apathy in between the three to five year intervals of renewal. In this sense politics becomes muted, or apolitical, as democracy is reduced to what might be called ‘electoral authoritarianism’, rather than embraced radically in its etymological sense of *demos* (people) *kratia* (power). This is hardly indicative of a system wherein emancipation might be forthcoming (Springer 2011).

Conceivably Scott makes such a conciliatory argument to challenge the notion that the state is the exclusive “sworn enemy” of anarchists (p.53), arguing that “the state is not the only institution that endangers freedom” (p.xiv). This is true of course, and an enormously important point, one that I have made myself in challenging how geographers have looked at anarchism as limited, rather than recognizing the integrality of its critique against all the multivariate modes of domination that exist in our world (Springer 2014b). Yet in making this point, it seems that Scott, at least in some ways, falls prey to the reductionist view of anarchism being little more than an anti-state philosophy, which risks contributing to the confusions of ideology that inform the so-called ‘anarcho-capitalists’, as well as to the crude rhetoric that critics use in their attempts to discredit anarchism. The likening of anarchism to mere rejection of the state corresponds with the notion that anarchism lacks organization. Yet anarchism is not synonymous with chaos, nor is it opposed to organization. It is about actively reinventing the everyday through a desire to create new forms of organization, and “enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties, or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy” (Graeber 2002: 70). Scott appears to intuitively recognize this, but he doesn’t seem to appreciate that many contemporary anarchists are actually on the same page. Drawing from a view

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

of anarchism that goes beyond statecentricity, he suggests something even more problematic: “both theoretically and practically, the abolition of the state is not an option. We are stuck, alas, with Leviathan, though not for all the reasons Hobbes had supposed, and the challenge is to tame it” (p.xvi). There is, no doubt, something to be said for this formulation, and indeed the bulk of anarchist engagements both historically and into the present moment have been less concerned with confronting the state than they have been with simply getting on with things and practicing mutuality and reciprocity in their situated contexts. Certainly Colin Ward (2001: 11) pointed to this idea when we wrote that anarchist society “is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state ... far from being a speculative vision of a future society, [anarchism] is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society”. A number of recent contributions to anarchist geographies argue much the same, embracing a prefigurative politics wherein the spectacular moment of revolution is replaced with the ongoing process of actually creating alternatives in the *here* and *now* (Ince 2012; Springer 2012; 2014c; White and Williams 2012). So many anarchists are intimately aware of the idea that the abolition of the state is a tall order, and one that is unlikely to happen in our lifetime.

Yet at the same time, I can't help but be turned off by the notion that our challenge is to attempt to 'tame' the state. This sounds surprisingly close to a liberal democratic project, and it is not a form of anarchism that I can stand for. In the face of intractable violence, of which the state represents but one form, do we also seek merely to 'tame' racism, gender domination, and child abuse, or are these patterns of malevolence that we seek to ultimately eliminate? While we go about the business of prefiguration—that is, effecting social relationships and organizing principles in the present that attempt to reflect the future society being sought—it remains necessary to refuse the state at every possible turn, lest we chain ourselves to a mindless scenario of lather, rinse, and repeat. Certainly the most viable anarchist trajectories are the mundane encounters of the here and now, but the insurrectionary possibilities of the everyday should not be underestimated. For anarchists, thinking of the end of the state becomes a lived process, where we cut it out of our daily activities in any way we possibly can. What is so frustrating about Scott's appeal for the taming of

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

the state is that he implicitly seems to recognize that the suggestion itself is clearly wrong. Scott points to what he calls ‘infrapolitics’, including foot-dragging, poaching, pilfering, dissimulation, sabotage, desertion, absenteeism, squatting, and flight, which most anarchists have long referred to as direct action (Graeber 2009). “Why risk getting shot for a failed mutiny when desertion will do just as well? Why risk an open land invasion when squatting will secure de facto land rights? Why openly petition for rights to wood, fish, and game when poaching will accomplish the same purpose quietly?”, Scott (p.xx) asks us to consider. These interrogations provoke the bigger question: why confront the state through civil disobedience and the spectre of revolution, when you can simply get on with things yourself through the direct action of prefigurative politics? The notion of ‘taming’ seems misguided for other reasons as well, particularly since the state co-opts and corrupts whatever it can for its own means and ends. Here again, Scott seems to acknowledge this when he writes, “[m]ass defiance, precisely because it threatens the institutional order, gives rise to organizations that try to channel that defiance into the flows of normal politics, where it can be contained” (p.xviii). This is why anarchists are less concerned with civil disobedience as an appeal to the powerful and more concerned with direct action, which turns its back on the state and has nothing left to say. It simply does for itself what it wishes without seeking consent or concessions because it refuses to be fooled by any such ruses, wherein the state’s conciliation to popular demand is only ever episodic, reverting to bare Leviathan whenever it can. The state, quite simply, can’t help itself. Like all abusers it makes promises it can’t keep, and anarchists refuse to entertain the lies. While perhaps the idea of taming the state was simply a poor choice of wording, I get the sense that it comes from Scott not necessarily having familiarized himself with the most recent developments in anarchist thought. He recognizes the practice of prefigurative politics as he has observed them unfold in Southeast Asia, but reading ‘classical’ anarchism through Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and Élisée Reclus won’t necessarily give you a good sense of how prefiguration is being theorized today.

In addition to the framing of the argument around the state, I have some problems with a few of the ‘fragments’ that Scott uses to construct his argument as well. In particular, his advocacy for the petty bourgeoisie is problematic insofar as Scott confuses property and

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

possession, seemingly unaware of the distinction between the two that Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1970) brought to bear in the very first philosophical meditation on anarchism with *What is Property?* The distinction, where possession is rooted in actual use, while property is something that is mobilized for exploitation, is a foundational idea for anarchist thought. I've employed this idea, in direct conversation with Scott's (2009) own formulations on 'orality', in my own work with communities facing forced eviction in Cambodia (Springer 2013b), so this oversight seems like a missed opportunity for Scott to draw out the distinction in ways that resonate with peasant politics. More troubling for me though is the notion that the petty bourgeoisie should be celebrated. Rather than thinking outside of the box and exploring the greener pastures of mutual aid, voluntary association, horizontality, and self-management, Scott seemingly encourages a return to a simpler, smaller version of capitalism. I don't necessarily think this particular 'fragment' will sit well with (m)any anarchists given that right from the outset, anarchism was a vigorously opposed to capitalism and the violence it sows. Petty capitalism is still capitalism, and just as we wouldn't excuse petty racism, petty homophobia, and petty sexism because they are 'small', we shouldn't celebrate more moderate or limited versions of capital. The monopolizing spirit of capitalism (Harvey 2007) ensures that its hunger is insatiable, where sooner or later the proclivity for competition will be transformed into bloodlust.

Scott makes a similar calamitous mistake in his discussion of schooling. While he recognizes universal public education as being designed to produce a labor force required by industry and patriotic citizens whose loyalty to the nation will trump all other identity categories, Scott then confusingly steps back from this powerful critique. We are told that the institution of the school has softened its edges, having been infused with "changing theories of pedagogy" and "youth culture" (p.71). Yet I wonder how schooling, which is a colonial exercise in normativity that has been rolled out across the globe as the white man's last burden (Black 2010), can be seen as anything more than organized ethnocide and manufactured capitulation on a monumental scale? Where is the 'fragment' about the residential school system in Canada or the loss of aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies in Australia? Scott gets a little lost here, and instead of exploring the fruitful domain of unschooling (Hern 2008; Holt 1983), wherein the creativity of an anarchist

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

education is unleashed through the geographical axiom of ‘learning through the soles of one’s feet’, he offers his critique and then promptly surrenders his point. If we want our children to be deskilled, unthinking, standardized automatons then there really is no better place for them than in schools. He could have left it at that. Scott repeats this same mistake again with respect to legal processes, where we are told that our current rule of law may be slightly more “capacious and emancipatory than its predecessors were” (p.22). This makes no sense at all from an anarchist perspective, as law is the precise opposite of freedom, it is the very tool through which the violent accumulation of capital proceeds (Springer 2013c). To be blunt, “the exact and irrefutable definition of legislation, intelligible to all, is that: Laws are rules made by people who govern by means of organized violence, for compliance with which the non-complier is subjected to blows, to loss of liberty, or even to being murdered”(Tolstoy 2004). Unfortunately, while outwardly Scott’s reading of capitalism, schooling, and law having gentler forms might make sense, none of this speaks to the hardened core of contemporary political institutions, which are so thoroughly entrenched behind the veneer of legitimacy as to be beyond reproach, making them extremely dangerous weapons of state control. These institutions are more nefarious today than they ever were. Soft edges afford an illusion of freedom, and as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1971) once lamented, “[n]one are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free”. Getting repeatedly hit in the head with a baseball bat wrapped up in a pillow will still knock you into submission and rattle your sensibilities to the point of being unable to think clearly. We don’t need any extra padding for the bat, or excuses as to why the existing padding is better than being hit directly. What we need instead is to actively dodge the blow, to categorically refuse to be bludgeoned, and to throw curveballs at the batter until the state finally strikes out.

*Two Cheers for Anarchism* is presented as an introductory frame for thinking about anarchism, yet Scott fully admits that he doesn’t engage in an ideologically rigorous discussion of anarchist thinkers or movements. While a welcome change of pace in some respects, it can also be read as a weakness as I’m not entirely sure whom this book is actually intended to serve. In order for the book to fully make sense as an ‘anarchist’ text, it needs to be read by someone who is already well versed in this discussion. As someone who is quite familiar with anarchist philosophy,

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

I appreciated most of the ‘fragments’ that are offered up here. My longstanding interest in Southeast Asia, and hence deep appreciation for Scott’s impressive body of scholarship also meant that it was fascinating to see one of my favourite political theorists drawing the same sorts of conclusions out of his own work, as I have drawn from my ongoing research with subaltern peoples in Cambodia. I was well positioned to be able to think through the connections to the anarchist literature that Scott pays homage to, but unfortunately scarcely cites. The broken shards of his fragmentary approach were easy enough for me to assemble into a complete picture. Yet I can’t help but think that for other readers situated differently than myself, the lack of explicit connections may be interpreted as a major deficiency in the text, as these linkages will not be as immediately obvious. At the same time, if this is intended as a book for those already actively engaged in thinking about anarchism, I think many of the ‘fragments’ that are offered by Scott will already be very familiar, particularly the criticisms of state schooling (Illich 1971; Sussia 2010), the idea of play as an anarchist parable (Ward 1978; 2001), and the critique of (social) science (Ferrell 2009; Feyerabend 2010; Zerzan 2005). Scott is a great storyteller, so I didn’t mind being reintroduced to these ideas through his illuminating prose, yet the benefit of Scott’s work in the past has been its ability to weave grand narratives together with situated knowledges that give us a better understanding and more complete picture of the world, and on this occasion I can’t help but feel that he fell slightly short of the mark. To those uninitiated in anarchist thought the book will likely appear more as a series of anecdotes that, while fascinating in their own right, don’t really add up to a coherent vision of anarchism’s possibilities, thereby reducing the potential impact that this book might otherwise enjoy. I can still recommend the book insofar as it casts some much needed light on the everydayness of anarchism, which is particularly important owing to the weight of Scott’s name and the of clarity of his pen. Few authors are better positioned than Scott to render anarchist ideas more luminous and less threatening in the wider social sciences. However, rather than stopping at two cheers, I really wish Scott would have taken the time to offer one more cheer for anarchism by bringing the contemporary anarchist literature more clearly into view. In order to fully appreciate the full spectrum of what this beautiful and emancipatory praxis has to offer, we need that third cheer for anarchism.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## References

- Anderson B (2005) *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-colonial Imagination*. London: Verso
- Black C (2010) *Schooling the World: The White Man's Last Burden* (documentary). Telluride: Lost People Films
- Ferrell J (2008) Against method, against authority ... for anarchy. In R Amster, A DeLeon, L A Fernandez, A J Nocella and D Shannon (eds) *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy* (pp73-81). New York: Routledge
- Feyerabend P (2010) *Against Method* (4<sup>th</sup> edn). London: Verso
- Foucault M (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (ed C Gordon; trans C Gordon, L Marshall, J Mepham and K Soper). New York: Pantheon
- Goethe J W (1971[1809]) *Elective Affinities*. London: Penguin
- Graeber D (2002) The new anarchists. *New Left Review* 13:61-73
- Graeber D (2009) *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland: AK Press
- Harvey D (2007) *The Limits to Capital* (new edn). Verso: New York
- Hern M (ed) (2008) *Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader*. Oakland: AK Press
- Holt J (1983) *How Children Learn*. New York: Merloyd Lawrence
- Illich I (1971) *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper and Row
- Ince A (2012) In the shell of the old: Anarchist geographies of territorialisation. *Antipode* 44(5):1645-1666
- Proudhon P-J (1970[1890]) *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. New York: Dover
- Scott J C (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Scott J C (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

- Scott J C (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Scott J C (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Springer S (2009) The neoliberalization of security and violence in Cambodia's transition. In S Peou (ed) *Human Security in East Asia: Challenges for Collaborative Action* (pp125-141). New York: Routledge
- Springer S (2010) *Cambodia's Neoliberal Order: Violence, Authoritarianism, and the Contestation of Public Space*. London: Routledge
- Springer S (2011) Public space as emancipation: Meditations on anarchism, radical democracy, neoliberalism, and violence. *Antipode* 43(2):525-562
- Springer S (2012) Anarchism! What geography still ought to be. *Antipode* 44(5):1605-1624
- Springer S (2013a) Anarchism and geography: A brief genealogy of anarchist geographies. *Geography Compass* 7(1):46-60
- Springer S (2013b) Illegal evictions? Overwriting possession and orality with law's violence in Cambodia. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13(4):520-546
- Springer S (2013c) Violent accumulation: A postanarchist critique of property, dispossession, and the state of exception in neoliberalizing Cambodia. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103(3):608-626
- Springer S (2014a) Human geography without hierarchy. *Progress in Human Geography*  
DOI:10.1177/0309132513508208
- Springer S (2014b) War and pieces. *Space and Polity* 18(1):85-96
- Springer S (2014c) Why a radical geography must be anarchist. *Dialogues in Human Geography* forthcoming
- Sussia J (2010) *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oakland: PM Press
- Tolstoy L (2004[1900]) *The Slavery of Our Times*. Whitefish: Kessinger
- Ward C (2001[1973]) *Anarchy in Action*. London: Freedom
- Ward C (1978) *The Child in the City*. London: Bedford Square

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

White R J and Williams C C (2012) The pervasive nature of heterodox economic spaces at a time of neoliberal crisis: Towards a 'post-neoliberal' anarchist future. *Antipode* 44(5):1625- 1644

Zerzan J (ed) (2005) *Against Civilization*. Los Angeles: Feral House

*Simon Springer*  
*Department of Geography*  
*University of Victoria*  
*simonspringer@gmail.com*

*March 2014*