Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play

James C. Scott

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Most of what each of us does in our everyday lives relies on forms of organization and cooperation that are not centrally directed. People find a way to get along. We are hardwired to cooperate when it is in our long-term self-interest. In James C. Scott's book *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, six chapters provide us with twenty-six fragments designed to develop in the reader what Scott calls an "anarchist's squint" on the world. Scott shows us how much we already do without the state and how much we achieve through "mutuality, or cooperation without hierarchy or state rule" (xii).

Seeing like an anarchist takes practice, and Scott's book can be read as a devotional, guiding us into that practice. "[I]f you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost every other angle" (xii). Scott's anarchism is process oriented, like Robert Nozick's approach to constraining the state.

Scott's methodology relies on a mechanism such as an invisible hand that guides social phenomena; the reader should not be deterred by the word *anarchism* in the title. Scott makes no claim to nihilist anarchism, though he leans toward left-anarchism and explicitly rejects the anarcho-capitalist fad. Scott's anarchism is not like David Friedman's project that tries to demonstrate how we can restructure society without a state. He comes closer to joining the likes of Peter Leeson and Peter Boettke by employing anarchism as a benchmark for positive comparative institutional analysis. The state Scott is concerned with is the same as that addressed in Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Wiengast's *Violence and Social Orders*, entailing all those institutions—formal and informal—that constitute the status quo that buttresses the capitalized interests.

In chapter 1, "Disorder and 'Charisma,'" Scott shows us the subversive potential of anarchist movements—in particular, the movement without a central organization: the wildcat strike, the draft-dodgers, the foot-draggers, and the saboteurs who practice spiteful infra-politics against the elites to whom they are accountable. "A demonstration, even a massive one, with leaders was one thing, a rioting mob was another. There were no coherent demands, no one to talk to" (18). Politics is exchange, but a collectivist movement with no decision makers is not doing politics. It is destroying the existing order.

Imagine an omnibus bill that simultaneously repeals the many wealth-transferring tax and subsidy programs that generate rent-seeking opportunities for politicians and special interests. Total social welfare would increase overnight as deadweight losses transformed into real surpluses. The political difficulties inherent in the transitional process are what prevent such omnibus reforms. Outright disorganized rebellion would sidestep the political process and accomplish the transition.

Unfortunately, Scott fails to see that each of these actions is ultimately destructive and a negative-sum game. Other left-anarchists have identified better ways to practice

subversion. Mark Van Steewyk, in *That Holy Anarchist*, directs us toward the politics of Jesus in praxis. Radical hospitality, sacrificial altruism, and frugality are redemptive acts that preserve a healthy spiteful attitude toward the state. People will drag their feet, will toss sawdust into the gears, will lie on their tax returns, and will defect their obligations quietly and selfishly. But the individual who pays her taxes, and then works to end poverty through direct donations, like sharing her home with the needy, ultimately does more to effect the end of poverty than the rebel.

In chapter 2, "Vernacular Order, Official Order," Scott shows us that different problems may call for different levels of organization. Subsidiarity is illustrated by the naming of roads. It is practical for a local villager to talk about driving up old Durham Road from home one day, but when an ambulance is needed, one better identify Route 77 and the mile marker because there is more than one road leading into Durham. Local knowledge is insufficient for securing help from outside.

However, "[t]he order, rationality, abstractness, and synoptic legibility of certain schemes of naming … lend themselves to hierarchical power" (34). There are technologies and lexicons for control, and others for resistance, as Eli Dourado has shown. These will always abide in some tension because there will always be particularities of time and place—local knowledge in the Hayekian sense—that resist control, even as economies of scale create pressure toward centralized control. Planning is necessarily parasitic on a preexisting productive informal order.

One of the interesting things that left-anarchists bring to the table is an understanding that we are weak volitional individuals. In chapter 3, "The Production of Human Beings" Scott says that "[a]ny activity we can imagine, any institution, no matter what its manifest purpose, is also, willy-nilly, transforming people" (67). The methodological individualist bristles against such talk. We want each of the agents in our models to be rational and, though we never say it, responsible—none of this "formation of the self" squishy talk.

Still, it is healthy to ask, with Scott: "Are the authoritarian and hierarchical characteristics of most contemporary life-world institutions—the family, the school, the factory, the office, the worksite—such that they produce a mild form of institutional neurosis?" (79). Scott wants us to be aware that hierarchy tends to "produce a more passive subject who lacks the spontaneous capacity for mutuality" (80). Scott prescribes an anarchist calisthenics in which we are encouraged to intentionally break a senseless law on occasion for the formation of individuals who then are equipped for deliberative democracy and resistance to tyranny.

In chapter 4, we find Scott joining with Deirdre McCloskey and Jane Jacobs in raising up "Two Cheers for the Petty Bourgeoisie." Scott dignifies the petite bourgeoisie because they "represent a precious zone of autonomy and freedom … [that] are, along with mutuality, at the center of an anarchist sensibility" (85). The ethic of the shopkeeper is to look out for her customer. Jacobs is praised for noting how urban neighborhoods formed a nexus of relationships such that there were "eyes on the street" reducing the need for official policing entities. A walk to the store deterred more crime than a cop on the beat. Anarchy in this sense is mutuality and community through which the petty bourgeoisie

provides many of the public goods necessary for creating the "building block[s] of social solidarity and public action" (99).

Scott is an analytical egalitarian. Models and measurements used in economics are prone to the advancement of pointy-headed ideas provided by experts. Chapter 5, "For Politics," is Scott's defense of the deliberative process of democracy in contrast to rule by experts. Experts love nothing more than to quantify their results, he observes—except perhaps to measure the citations to their publications. In resistance to experts, we need to amplify the voices of the public. Rule by experts can lead to horrors, such as eugenics, so a deliberative space is essential to keeping experts in check.

In Scott's final chapter, "Particularity and Flux," we see Adam Smith's understanding of sympathy leading to an anarchist squint against the state. Experts operate in terms of abstractions and so do states. Someone may advocate for a government program to help the poor or for insurance to farmers or for the creation of jobs. In the abstract, solutions to these problems will always appear to be too big for the individual to do anything about. However, programs are inflexible, and oftentimes unnecessary when the particulars are made known. Neighborly assistance works better to elucidate sympathy among people. Scott tells the story of Huguenots in Vichy, France, who provided refuge to Jews who were escaping the Nazis. Many neighbors were unwilling to pledge aid in advance, but when faced with a family in need of a meal, the neighbors sympathized and became committed for the duration. Sympathy arises when the particular irrupts and direct personal action is able to respond with flexibility in contrast to the cold administrative dispensations the state can dole out.

Scott's book has many errors, but his case-study squints are better than the economist's usual models that capture insights but never bear out practically. Ronald Coase said he wanted to understand what actually happens in the real world. *Two Cheers for Anarchism* provides such useful squints at anarchic systems solving everyday problems through mutuality and cooperation.

The anarchism that Scott shows us is quaint, mundane, and generally constructive. It is part of that common grace that sustains us. We learn from his squinting to hesitate before saying, "There ought to be a law!" in any particular circumstance but, instead, to investigate, in the manner that Elinor Ostrom taught us, how it is that people are coordinating to overcome a problem without the help of the state.

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