

# Two Cheers For Anarchism?

Peter Werbe

2013

a review of

James C. Scott: *Two cheers for Anarchism; Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, Princeton University Press, 2012, 169 pp., \$35 cloth and e-book

If we are expressing rankings by hurrahs, I would give James C. Scott's book two cheers as he does for anarchism. Still, this middling mark is much higher than his slim volume of anarchist principles has garnered from other reviewers who express this philosophy.

In fact, many writers have not given it even a single whoop, concentrating on the book's flaws—criticisms with which I agree. Still, there is too much here eloquently expressing the anarchist ethos to completely dismiss Scott as an “anarcho-liberal,” as Malcolm Harris did in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Jim Scott, a supporter of this magazine, is a professor of anthropology at Yale University, and identifies himself as a “mediocre part-time farmer and beekeeper,” whose scholarly work is written through what he designates as “an anarchist squint.”

For instance, his last book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, and another, *Weapons of the Weak*, illustrate how people without power resist those who attempt to exercise it over them. It is by flight, sabotage, sloth, and a host of other tactics commonly available to those who hate the social and economic situation they've been forced into, but can't directly confront those who wield power.

I don't know whether Scott would like his brand of anarchism categorized but it falls squarely within the individualist tradition of Max Stirner and others. Scott quite properly sees the state as squashing the individual and quotes approvingly from Pierre Proudhon's famous aphorism, “To be governed is to be...”

However, as Scott states in his introduction, the reader should not expect accounts of the heroic collective struggles fought throughout history to overcome the oppression of the individual he describes.

Instead, he writes of the malign effect of the “authoritarian and hierarchical characteristics of most contemporary life-world institutions—the family, the school, the factory, the office, the worksite,” which “destroy the autonomy and initiative of their subjects.” This is a description of Wilhelm Reich's mass character structure of submission; one that all authoritarian systems depend upon to have their rule seen as natural and challenges to it appear as hopeless.

Much of the derision of Scott comes from a single paragraph which expresses, according to his critics, a pessimism and an abandonment of revolutionary anarchist principles. He states in the book's preface:

“I believe both theoretically and practically, the abolition of the state is not an option. We are stuck, alas, with Leviathan, though not at all for the reasons Hobbes had supposed, and the challenge is to tame it. That challenge may well be beyond our reach.”

This is certainly open to the charge of the author being an anarcho-liberal who supports rebellion against authority but ultimately wants a nicer capitalism and a kinder state. But, it is hard to place his work into that box when sentences like this appear:

“Episodes of structural change, therefore, tend to occur only when massive, noninstitutionalized disruption in the form of riots, attack on property, unruly demonstrations, theft, arson, and open defiance threatens established institutions.”

Scott has no confidence in established organizations or parties which he correctly says have an investment in maintaining things as they are. His sentences just above seem to have more in common with Black Bloc perspectives than any sort of liberalism or leftism. However, if they are divorced from a call for the abolition of the state and capital, can't they be seen as only a militant reformism?

If I had edited his book, I would have suggested to the author that he pose his contentious paragraph as a question, as a nagging potentiality, that the state and capital have grown to a point, as Jacques Camatte suggests in *The Wandering of Humanity*, of having run away from human control; that the entire planet has been integrated into one monstrous work/war machine with a population, not only psychologically domesticated to the state and capital, but with a demographic which makes the anarchist vision of decentralized, cooperative villages an impossibility.

Maybe that condemns me to the same reformist hell into which Scott has been tossed by some anarchists.

Those thoughts occur to me at my darkest moments, but are there many of us who really think anarchist revolution is on the immediate agenda and with a possibility of success? Aren't we, in a good part of our political work, although motivated by a desire to abolish a ravenous economy and its vicious police apparatus, most often involved in trying to stop the worst abuses of the empire? In other words, “tame it,” as Scott advocates.

Still, he would have done well to have phrased it differently. For one thing, capitalism only gets more murderous and destructive as it approaches its limits of nature and population. It might be that reform will be as difficult to achieve as revolution, so it makes sense to seek the vision we want, rather than being content to settle for what seems “possible” at the moment.

The other problem with his book for which he deserves no cheers and even a few boos, is his curious contention that there is something admirable in the petit bourgeoisie, the small shopkeepers and landholders of the world, which he identifies as the planet's largest social and economic class.

He touts them as men and women who oppose large governmental or corporate institutions, who put an emphasis on autonomy, and are often a bulwark against the massification of society.

The neighborhood convenience store versus Walmart, is what he means.

In an email exchange, Scott wondered why anarchists weren't more supportive of small enterprises. My first thought was that he must be aware of Sinclair Lewis' novel, *Babbitt*, and he must have read Dickens.

To be sure, the small woolen producers of Northern England who rose up in the early 1800s under the rubric of the Luddites against the establishment of the first factorium with their power-driven looms meet his definition, as perhaps do those t-shirt street peddlers in Nairobi who sell wares comprised of what we donated to our local Salvation Army.

But, too often the small shopkeepers and producers in impoverished nations keep their employees in near slavery with horrid working conditions even ones created by so-called progressive aid programs, such as micro-loans for women.

In the West, think Scrooge for the archetypal mentality of a boss of a small store: cheap, mean, suspicious, demanding. The worst low paying jobs with terrible supervisors I ever had were at small stores; the best were at big companies.

Additionally, Scott must know that the petit bourgeoisie are the backbone of every modern fascist movement from Mussolini's Blackshirts to today's fanatical Tea Partiers. Marx predicted that as capital began to be defined by monopolization, this class would be squeezed to the point where their interests would coincide with a revolutionary proletariat and oppose large business owners in tandem with the workers.

History has proved him wrong however, with the economic crisis of the 1930s being an ideal example. Unable to deal psychologically with being driven downwards as a class, the small capitalists opted to join the Nazis, Franco or whatever fantasy politics happened to promise they could maintain their precarious hold on their place in capitalist society.

Wasn't it a tip-off to Scott when Francis Fukuyama, a conservative political theorist, endorsed his book, presumably for his appreciation of the class of merchants described above. Talk about being damned by faint praise. That

alone should have sent Scott back to his computer for a rewrite, but, instead, Fukuyama's endorsement is featured on the back of the book.

Realizing there is a tendency for critics to concentrate on objections to a text rather than its virtues, John Sinclair, a former *Fifth Estate* staff member, once said we spend all of our time arguing with those with whom we are in 98 percent agreement. In political circles, this is often true.

So, I will end with an endorsement. Scott's book is a sharp, well-argued advocacy for anarchism [including his points with which I disagree] that suggest an eyes-wide-open variety rather than a squint.

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