Review: Two Cheers for Anarchism by James C. Scott

Anarcho

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What is it about anthropologists and anarchism? Noted anarchists Brian Morris and David Graeber are anthropologists in their day jobs while Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus both made significant contributions to the field. Perhaps it is simple enough – anthropology shows that people have lived in many different ways and so confirms a basic principle of anarchism: capitalism is just one of many systems and, like others, can be replaced with something else.

James C. Scott is another anthropologist writing about anarchism and, as he notes in his latest book *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, his studies led him to draw libertarian conclusions. Like his first major work, the excellent *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, this new book will be read with great interest and enjoyment by anarchists and, hopefully, help others see the power of anarchist ways of analysing the world.

As the title of the book suggests, Scott is not quite an anarchist and is simply "making a case for a sort of anarchist squint" or seeing like an anarchist. (xii) The preface sketches both why he wrote the book and why it is not three cheers for anarchism.

"Unlike many anarchist thinkers," he explains, "I do not believe that the state is everywhere and always the enemy of freedom". (xiii) "Nor", he adds, does he "believe that the state is the only institution that endangers freedom". (xiv) Yet every genuine anarchist would concur with Scott's comments here. Anarchism has – regardless of what Marxists, propertarians and superficial academic accounts have proclaimed – *never* suggested that the state is the only institution that endangers freedom. The first self-proclaimed anarchist work, Proudhon's *What is Property?*, concluded that property is both "theft" and "despotism" and aimed to end both it and the state. Later anarchists quickly added other forms of hierarchical social relationships to oppose, not least patriarchy (which Proudhon illogically defended) and racism.

As such, Scott betrays his obvious knowledge and sympathies with anarchism by talking about a "last strand of anarchist thought" which "is the sort of libertarianism that tolerates (or even encourages) great differences in wealth, property, and status". (xiv) This "market fundamentalism" – better termed propertarian than the "libertarian" it has tried to steal, sadly with some success, from us anti-capitalists – ignores, as Scott rightly stresses, "the coercive structure of the situation … that impels people into … catastrophic choices" and so "huge disparities in wealth, property, and status make a mockery of freedom". (xv) The point is well made but it simply repeats what

anarchists have been arguing from the start and it would have been have better to simply note that this so-called "libertarianism" is libertarian in name only – the poverty of modern political theory is shown by the acceptance as "libertarian" an ideology which seriously discusses the merits of voluntary slavery.

In terms of the state not "always [being] the enemy of freedom", that is true but it must always be remembered, as he himself notes, that while "*in some circumstances*" the state can play "an emancipatory role" this "possibility has arisen only as a result of democratic citizenship" and "occur[s] only when massive extra-institutional disruption from below threatens the whole political edifice" (xiv) In short, the state acts to defend freedom for the many rather than the few when it is forced to by the general population and its pressure from below – a position which anarchists have long recognised. As Malatesta put it in his *Anarchist Programme*:

> "While preaching against every kind of government, and demanding complete freedom, we must support all struggles for partial freedom, because we are convinced that one learns through struggle, and that once one begins to enjoy a little freedom one ends by wanting it all … Since government today has the power … to broaden or restrict the liberty of the citizen, and because we are still unable to tear this power from its grasp, we must seek to reduce its power and oblige governments to use it in the least harmful ways possible. But this we must do always remaining outside, and against, government, putting pressure on it through agitation in the streets … The only limit to the oppression of government is the power with which the people show themselves capable of opposing it … When the people meekly submit to the law, or their protests are feeble and confined to words, the government studies its own interests and ignores the needs of the people"

So when Scott uses the example of federal troops being used to help end segregation in schools in the Southern states of the USA we must remember the civil rights movement which forced this action of the federal state against the brutality of the local state. Without that popular movement and its direct action tactics, official segregation would have remained in existence for much longer. Not that Scott would disagree as this point simply repeats what he argues elsewhere in the book.

As such, anarchist thinkers have generally been more sophisticated in terms of struggles for reforms than the simplistic "anti-state" position Scott uses to draw differences between his position and anarchism. Can the state increase freedom? Only in-so-far as it has been tamed by the masses by pressure from outside. It is this we need to encourage and so the anarchist critique remains – real change comes from below. Yet this pressure from below does not change the state's essential role as defender of property and it will – like the capital it defends – seek to reverse reforms: hence the increase of authoritarianism and centralisation which has accompanied the neo-liberal period. So we need to reject the false dichotomy of neoliberalism (and the left) of privatisation versus nationalisation which is always just private capitalism against state capitalism and which hides the awkward fact that private power and hierarchy relies on state hierarchy and power.

Scott is pessimistic about the possibilities of achieving anarchism any time soon: "the abolition of the state is not an option … the challenge is to tame it". (xvi) Yet if "the abolition of the state" means ending the state and leaving everything else as it is (the dream of the propertarian) then

Scott is completely correct – that "is not an option" if you are seeking genuine freedom. No anarchist ever though abolishing the state was the only goal – it was part of a wider goal that included abolishing property, private hierarchies, etc. The notion of anarchism being solely "anti-state" was an invention of its enemies.

Nor is it a case that anarchists think the state will be abolished by chance. The "abolition of the state" is the end of a long process in which popular movements are created and struggle for improvements in the here-and-now until such time as it becomes possible for them to go further. All anarchists agree that our task today is to "tame" the state – and other forms of hierarchy – by building the new world while struggling against the old one. While some anarchists do indulge in abstract ultra-revolutionism (which usually veers into reformist practice of the most quietist and navel-gazing kind), this is not the perspective of the major anarchist thinkers of yesterday and today.

Scott's pessimism on the state is driven by the lack of popular movements after the 2008 crisis compared to those in the 1930s and the increased commodification of mainstream politics produced by the increase in inequality under neo-liberalism. Democracy needs relative equality otherwise it becomes "an utter charade" but, Scott suggests, "[t]his, of course, is the great dilemma for an anarchist. If relative equality is a necessary condition of mutuality and freedom, how can it be guaranteed except through the state?" (xvi) It is no such thing as it through state action – defending capitalist property rights (not least, limited liability), repressing workers revolts and power, the enclosure of public resources, etc. – that inequality increases. The current explosion in inequality dates from the 1980s when the state "tamed" the union movement: as workers ability to keep the value we create in our own hands was undermined it flooded upwards into the hands of senior management and the owning class. Similarly the privatisation of nationalised industries – particularly in "natural monopolies" – allowed the new sovereign consumers to be royally ripped-off to pay for the rising salaries of CEOs and increased dividends for shareholders. In some cases, such as the British railways, the state *increased* its payment of subsidises to the industry and so public money flowed directly into the coffers of private firms.

This suggests that freedom and equality are mutually reinforcing. Freedom in production – the abolition of wage-labour – will automatically increase equality and mutuality, for example, so it unfortunate that Scott seems to take the current economic system as a given when he indicates why its not "three cheers" for anarchism. Yet as an anthropologist, he should be aware that stateless societies are generally egalitarian while unequal ones have states (primarily to defend the haves from the have-nots and the private property that allows the latter's labour to enrich the former). As someone who has lived through the neo-liberal era, he should also be aware that its anti-state rhetoric has gone hand-in-hand with increasing state centralisation and regulation of the people and its organisations like unions – and best not mention the finance sector and corporation bailouts when the inevitable crisis appeared.

To use a recent example, immediately after the 2015 surprise victory of the Tories in the UK general election we saw the new Tory Business Secretary proclaim his firm support for "deregulation" while also laying out his new anti-union laws which will make it even harder for unions to strike. So decreased regulation for capital goes hand-in-hand with increased regulation for labour – what part of this is remotely "anti-state"?

This is no paradox. As Malatesta suggested in *Anarchy*:

> "liberalism, is in theory a kind of anarchy without socialism, and therefore is simply a lie, for freedom is not possible without equality, and real anarchy cannot exist without solidarity, without socialism. The criticism liberals direct at government consists of wanting to deprive it of some of its functions and to call upon the capitalists to fight it out among themselves, but it cannot attack the repressive functions which are of its essence: for without the *gendarme* the property owner could not exist, indeed the government's powers of repression must perforce increase as free competition results in more discord and inequality."

Talking of Malatesta, it must be noted that neither Tocqueville nor Sismondi have ever been proclaimed "anarchist thinkers" before so there is no reason why Scott places them with the likes of Proudhon, Bakunin, Malatesta and Rocker. (xxv)

Here ends the "anarcho-nit-picker" section of the review: what of the rest of the book?

As its subtitle suggests, it is broken up into six chapters on various issues relevant to anarchists and our fellow workers. Each chapter itself consists of various "Fragments" (29 in total) which generally succeed in their aim – to look at the world in an anarchist manner to draw out the libertarian aspects all around us and to show the weaknesses and paradoxes of the hierarchy of "official" society. These "fragments" include personal anecdotes, historical examples, and current developments that illustrate that anarchist analysis is powerful and that anarchist practice can appear in many an unlikely place.

It is a wide ranging collection of fragments he presents and, as such, difficult to summarise in a review. Suffice to say, Scott succeeds in showing that "if 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 any other angle. It will also become apparent that anarchist principles are active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism or anarchist philosophy." (xii)

The first chapter makes a basic point which anarchists have long stressed – the need for direct action, for the spirit of revolt or, to use his expression, "anarchist calisthenics". It recounts the importance of acts of insubordination today in preparing us for the bigger struggles we hope to see developing in the future. While the example used – jaywalking – somewhat trivialises the notion, his basic point is sound. Revolutions do not appear from nowhere, they are the product of many acts of revolt of various sizes which grow as people gain confidence in their power to act and change things. Hence the wider aims of the Tory anti-union laws – our rulers know that ideas change through struggle and use the state to clamp-down on any movement which challenge political or economic power and, in the process, generate an alternative vision to the status quo.

Scott is fully aware that viewing things "from above" impacts far wider than just the state – the capitalist workplace suffers from the same problems. His discussions on vernacular and official order (chapter two) are particularly of note in this regard. Life is messy and knowledge is often implicit, experience based and cannot be articulated in a manner which can be subject to codification by state or management bureaucracy. So the attempts by capital and state to gather, monopolise and control knowledge often end up losing it or impoverishing to such a degree that it becomes useless. Marxism, with its *a priori* prejudices about and unfounded hopes for central planning, is equally handicapped by this – even if we assume the elimination of the hierarchies associated with wage-labour and the distrust these (rightly) generate, the communication of data

and its transformation into information and knowledge is nowhere as easy as Marx assumed – even if we ignore the obvious dangers of bureaucratic power such a centralised planning system would produce.

Chapter three ("The Production of Human Beings") reminds us that people are shaped by their surroundings and that being bossed about all day in a hierarchical workplace cannot produce autonomous individuals who reach their full potential. Chapter five ("For Politics") is essential reading for everyone as it describes how the politics of the ruling few get smuggled into the foundational assumptions of various quantitative measuring and decision making techniques as well as their unintended consequences. Chapter six, like the first, contains pertinent observations on the nature of social change and popular movements and makes an obvious – if often ignored – point, namely that social revolts and movements rarely start and develop as the subsequent accounts assert.

To use two of Scott's examples, the people storming the Bastille did not know that this was the start of the Great French Revolution any more than the women strikers in Petrograd in 1917 foresaw the seizing of power by the Bolsheviks (or the crushing of a similar revolt four years later by the so-called workers' state). These events were later defined as part of a narrative, a simplification of messy events usually done to justify certain perspectives (hence the events of the Russian revolution become redefined as part of a narrative justifying the perspective of the Bolsheviks). Unlike the participants, the historians know the outcome and so frame the account accordingly. These are, as Scott notes, usually "just so" stories – but they influence current practice and theory *now*, most obviously on the left with the various illusions generated by accounts of the Russian Revolution used to keep the faithful seeking (always unsuccessfully) a vanguard party like the idealised one "forged" by Lenin. We must remember that history is as messy as life and our current struggles and we must not let the need to analyse, understand and generalise make us forget that.

The one chapter which did not chime was the fourth ("Two Cheers for the Petty Bourgeoisie") as it will simply reinforce Marxist prejudices on anarchism, particularly as it does not do justice to anarchist views on that subject. Anarchists have been portrayed in this way since Marx slandered Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and it is as untrue now as it was then. Still, Scott is right to stress that many people – particularly wage-slaves – are attracted to small-scale property due to the autonomy it promises (bye, bye boss!) but, as he also makes clear, this usually becomes illusionary for the few who do try. While anarchism can incorporate artisans and peasants far better than Marxism, the issue, as it always has been since 1840, is to combine autonomy with socialisation (by federal self-management and possession) rather than try to retreat back into small property.

To conclude, this is a very enjoyable book and anarchists and non-anarchists will gain from reading it. My criticisms are minor and are more about the emphasis Scott places on certain aspects of anarchism than the substance of it. Anarchism is not about some future post-revolutionary ideal society but rather working towards that goal in our activities today. As such, Scott's "Two Cheers" is based on a misunderstanding and reading his book will enrich anarchists and our practice regardless of how revolutionary you like to proclaim yourself.

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