

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

James C. Scott

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I often tell aspiring libertarians that they both can and should learn from people who are far removed from them ideologically. Indeed, if they fail to do so, then they are neglecting a vital part of their self-education. When asked whom I have in mind, I almost always mention James C. Scott. Two of Scott's earlier books, *Seeing Like a State* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*, are fascinating intellectual excursions for people of the libertarian bent, as well as for many others.

Scott continues in that vein with *Two Cheers for Anarchism*. If, in light of Scott's previous work, you have ever asked what exactly makes him tick, you will begin to get a sense of it here. *Two Cheers* is personal, reflective, and far removed from Scott's academic specialization, which lies in agrarian and subsistence societies and the cultures of resistance that they have often produced. Instead, this book addresses the familiar, everyday life of all-too-typical modern Europeans and Americans. He looks at it, though, with an "anarchist squint." And from that perspective, everything looks different.

Be warned, though, that he pulls no ideological punches whatsoever, and he makes no secret of his disdain for libertarians:

The last strand of anarchist thought I definitely wish to distance myself from is the sort of libertarianism that tolerates (or even encourages) great differences of wealth, property, and status. . . . There is no authentic freedom where huge differences make voluntary agreements or exchanges nothing more than legalized plunder.

We are then piously warned that anarcho-capitalists would defend the sale of children in the name of liberty.

Anyone who has worn the libertarian hat for even a short while has probably heard accusations of this kind before, and probably no reiteration of the idea of inalienable self-ownership will ever help. But I would urge libertarian readers to continue *Two Cheers* anyway. Perhaps even baby-sellers can learn a bit here. I know that I certainly did.

Scott shares with Robert Nozick a view of government not as a steady state, but as an evolutionary process—one that changes over time and is always the product of human action, but only rarely the successful product of human design. Much more often, government is the product of grand designs gone wrong. Revolutions always set out to free the world; they always fail; and what remains is that thing we call the state.

Given such a dismal view of the state, it's only natural to prefer anarchism. But Scott's is an anarchism of a particularly anti-dogmatic bent. The frontispiece depicts two lines of graffiti: "Spread anarchy" reads the first, which has been crossed out. Beneath it: "Don't tell me what to do!!"

One thing that occupies a central place in Scott's thought is the sheer act of deliberately causing state-fostered plans to go awry. His anarchism is not programmatic ("The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers. . ."); it's pragmatic, focused narrowly on the situation at hand, and keen on changing souls, not societies. Indeed, Scott makes relatively few claims about the structure of a good society. Instead he writes things like this:

One day you will be called on to break a big law in the name of justice and rationality. Everything will depend on it. You have to be ready. How are you going to prepare for that day when it really matters? You have to stay "in shape" so that when the big day comes you will be ready. What you need is "anarchist calisthenics." Every day or so break some trivial law that makes no sense, even if it's only jaywalking. Use your own head to judge whether a law is just or reasonable. That way, you'll keep trim; and when the big day comes, you'll be ready.

We all know, or we should know, that most of us are urged in the opposite direction. Obedience to authority is ordinary, and disobedience is rather more like running a marathon: perhaps it's laudable, but it's certainly not something that comes naturally.

Scott wonders why this should be the case. The literature on obedience to authority is vast, prompted by 20th century atrocities and the pioneering work of Stanley Milgram. Why is it that people obey orders, rather than disobeying or viewing them with suspicion?

Scott's third chapter, "The Production of Human Beings," ponders just this question. "We live most of our lives in institutions: from the family to the school, to the army, to the business enterprise. These institutions to some considerable degree shape our expectations, our personalities, and our routines." These institutions aren't merely functional; they don't simply produce a given product or service. They also produce mindsets. Scott suggests that the mindsets produced by large-scale industrial production, mass urbanization, mass militarization, and the patriarchal family are inimical to free thinking: "Is it reasonable," he asks, "to expect someone whose waking life is almost completely lived in subservience . . . to suddenly become, in a town meeting, a courageous, independent-thinking, risk-taking model of individual sovereignty?"

That's a tough question, though not an unfamiliar one. Indeed, its kind can be found in many different eras and many different ideological camps. Michel Foucault thought along very similar lines, and even the early American republic did too—as when legislators established property requirements for voting. No subservient electors for them!

This is not, I trust, a solution Scott would have preferred. Yet the positive contents of his view of the good society, thinly articulated as they are, are nonetheless intriguing for their similarities here. They bear a strong resemblance to the early republic, stripped, of course, of its undeniable racism and sexism: "A society dominated by smallholders and shopkeepers comes closer to equality and to popular ownership of the means of production than any economic system yet devised."

It's a surprisingly bourgeois, surprisingly Tocquevilleian anarchism. That is, if anarchism is even the proper word anymore, which one may plausibly doubt. Has there ever been a society of smallholders and shopkeepers without at least a minimal state? If there hasn't been, one might search for hypothetical ways to make it work, but that isn't what *Two Cheers* is about.

BOOK REVIEWS

Readers searching for such hypothetical society-building will go away disappointed—and that, finally, is what *Two Cheers* is about. Such projects end in disappointment. That's exactly what they always do.

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