

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchist Discourse in Asian Studies

Apichai Shipper

March 2016

Apichai Shipper
Anarchist Discourse in Asian Studies
March 2016

Retrieved on 26th July 2023 from pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/review-essays/anarchist-discourse-in-asian-studies.

DOI: 10.5509/2016891103

Published in *Pacific Affairs* Volume 89 – No. 1.

theanarchistlibrary.org

TWO CHEERS FOR ANARCHISM: Six Essay Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity and Meaningful Work and Play. *By James C. Scott.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 198 pp. US\$24.95, cloth. ISBN 9780691155296.

UNDER THREE FLAGS: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination. *By Benedict Anderson.* London; Brooklyn: Verso, 2005. 255 pp. US\$18.95, ISBN: 9781844670901, paper. US\$25.00, ISBN: 9781844670376, cloth.

ANARCHISM AND SYNDICALISM IN THE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL WORLD, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution. *Studies in Global Social History, Vol. 6. Edited by Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt.* Leiden: Brill, 2010. lxxiv, 434 pp. (Illus.) €109.00, cloth. ISBN 9789004188495.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. *By Michele Ford.* London; New York: Routledge, 2012. 226 pp. US\$145.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-52355-4.

With time, academics of all disciplines bore even themselves. Recent works on anarchism by Benedict Anderson and James C. Scott, however, have renewed an appreciation for an anarchist approach in the study of political history, while rejuvenating exciting new research about people on the margins of society in Asia. Unlike most scholars of area studies or comparative politics today who care more of being unimportantly right by borrowing a natural science methodology with careful hypotheses about minute social or political problems, Anderson and Scott embrace the possibility of being monumentally wrong while engaging in a regional or global scale based on a wide and comparative reading. At the very least, their non-state-centric or marginal peoples approach has pushed international relations/area studies scholars to reinterpret a political community beyond its national boundaries. Based on the author's personal relationship with Anderson, the review essay also explores some reasoning behind these two thinkers, who are highly cited across various disciplines yet not well accepted within their own field of political science.

This review essay pays personal tribute to Benedict R. O'G. Anderson and James C. Scott. To the former, I owe part of my academic (and moral) training. I have never met the latter but have read most of his published works. I consider his *The Art of Not Being Governed* to be one of the most significant books I have read in the past ten years.¹ Due to the wide-ranging topics and intellectual inquiries the book engages, I have assigned

¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

it in all of my classes concerning comparative politics, international relations, and migration. If you should find the style of this review essay to be too subjective or personal, then it may be advisable to skip to other more orthodox pieces within the journal. The fact that you continue to read the following words attest to your acceptance of how importantly these two individuals have impacted your own work and/or thinking. In my own current research, I have borrowed Scott's conceptualization in *The Art of Not Being Governed* to interpret the present situation of oppressed Chinese trainees in contemporary Japan as a socio-political phenomenon of people wanting to escape from excessive control and wishing to be free. Similar to historical times when certain Southeast Asian people refused to be assimilated, integrated, and controlled by the state and escaped to the hills/Zomia (a geographic area in the highlands of northern Mainland Southeast Asia and the mountains of southwest China), Chinese trainees seek refuge in Japanese migrant-support NGOs that protect and fight for them. Like Zomia in Southeast Asia (and southern China), I argued that local Japanese NGOs provide more than 1,200 Chinese escapees with greater freedoms and protection.

Ironically, these seasoned scholars make no claims for theoretical breakthroughs; yet, their works have enormously influenced and shaped new scholarship in Southeast Asian studies, nationalism, and social movement theories. Anderson and Scott are well known, not simply as experts of one/two/three Southeast Asian countries, but also as multidisciplinary madmen who can bring to bear a more global/regional perspective based on wide and comparative reading. By examining peoples who are marginal but transformative to the study of political history in Southeast Asia, they have ignited energetic discussions in numerous panels of scholarly conferences and special issues in academic journals. In a similar line of intellectual inquiry, Geoffrey Robinson runs a graduate seminar at University of California, Los Angeles entitled "Why do Govern-

ments Kill Their Citizens?” This non-state-centric approach has pushed international relations/area studies scholars to reinterpret a political community beyond its national boundaries or a linear, “nation = people = culture” matrix. In these four books, people on the margins of society are shown to have made significant political impacts in both historical and contemporary Asia.

Scott’s *Two Cheers for Anarchism* reinforces this approach, while invoking anarchist sensibility for “mutuality without hierarchy,” creativity, cooperation, and freedom. In *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, Scott employs an anarchist critique (minus a call for the abolition of the state or capitalism) to argue nostalgically for a return to organic human cooperatives of a pre-standardized age. For him, the over-quantification and standardization/homogenization of everyday life, which are being reinforced and spread through parasitic formal organizations like public schools and Fordist factories, weakens the vitality of civic dialogue among ordinary people. Scott appreciates the “anarchist tolerance for confusion and improvisation that accompanies social learning, and confidence in spontaneous cooperation and reciprocity” (xii). He discusses how Parisian taxi drivers would bring traffic to a standstill if they were to blindly follow all the rules “by-the-book.” Alternatively, he praises children’s playgrounds in Copenhagen that the children have built themselves based on their own experiences and social learning. Scott finds, “the great emancipatory gains for human freedom have not been the result of orderly institutional procedures but of disorderly, unpredictably spontaneous action cracking upon the social order from below” (141).

Unlike Karl Marx, Scott embraces the *petit bourgeoisie* class members who hold modest ambitions; that is, having a bit of land and/or running their own small businesses. For Scott, artisans, small landholders, and independent producers reinvigorate civic vitality and constitute the heart of most struggles for equality and justice. Scott writes, “the petty bourgeoisie pro-

that I was actually listening to that piece during my drive from DC to his place and still had it in the car. I put the CD in my car stereo and listened to it with Ben. As this CD is a compilation of guitar music performed by John Williams, it includes one of my favourite piano songs on guitar, Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédie n° 3*. I introduced it to Ben just when the car was arriving at his driveway. Even after I had put the shift stick to P, Ben didn’t move and was still engulfed in the beautiful music. I told him “C’mon Ben.” He replied, “Let’s listen to the end.” I was just about to say, “We can take the CD out and listen to it in the house” when I realized that Ben does not own a CD player. I stayed inside the car and listened to the most beautiful guitar music, despite having heard it hundreds of times before on my high-end stereo system. But this time, it was in a car under the August rain ... next to my most inspiring and beloved mentor, friend, and fellow-traveller.

When I was in graduate school some years later, I had found out that Scott had made these same arguments in *The Moral Economy of the Peasants, Weapon of the Weak*, and *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, which Ben had obviously read. Most teachers would have simply assigned the readings to their students (as a form of passive learning) but Anderson prefers to have his students “actively” come up with the answer themselves. Anderson and Scott are good friends, who regularly share ideas with each other before the general public. In fact, they even share students, like John Sidel, before sending them off into the academic world. Anderson and Scott were first drawn together as graduate students in the Government department (Anderson at Cornell and Scott at Harvard) while attending an annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, where Scott would eventually be elected as its president. From their initial meeting, they not only shared academic interests in Southeast Asia but also their intellectual affinity to the anarchy approach to the study of political culture. Not surprisingly, both Scott and Anderson live on farms, but only Scott actually farms and raises farm animals. They travel extensively throughout the world, speak at least three Southeast Asian languages (in addition to other Romance languages), and are masters of the English language. Their lively prose resembles that of Charles Dickens rather than the boring style demanded by their discipline of political science. Sadly, as Sidel admits, “have no illusions that there is much space for the likes of a Ben Anderson or a Jim Scott in academic life today, especially in Political Science!”

Although they have missed the Romantic Era by about a half century, Anderson and Scott are Romanticists. I still remember one of the most beautiful moments I have spent with Ben. It was during a rainy day on August 2014 at his farm house in upstate New York. We were coming back from grocery shopping at an Asian supermarket when he mentioned that his favourite (Spanish) guitar music was “Romance.” I said

vides ... informal social work, public safety, the aesthetic pleasures of an animated and interesting streetscape, a large variety of social experiences and personalized services, acquaintance networks, informal neighbourhood news and gossip, a building block of social solidarity and public action, and (in the case of the smallholding peasantry) good stewardship of the land” (99). He then concludes that 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” (100).

Similarly, Anderson’s protagonists in *Under Three Flags* (i.e., José Rizal, Isabelo de los Reyes), who posed a threat to Spanish colonialism, also belong in this class. Anderson highlights the cosmopolitanism of the elite Filipino nationalists, who were multilingual, well travelled, and highly cultured, as courageous political activists of their time. In *Under Three Flags*, Anderson suggests that anti-colonial struggles in the Philippines (Katipunan revolutionary flag of 1894) and Cuba (current Cuban flag adopted in 1902) were both linked by anarchism (an ‘A’ with a circle around it on a black flag). He notes that a series of transnational actions and discussions occurred simultaneously across the globe during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, or what he calls the “Age of Early Globalization,” when anarchism was a dominant element of the radical Left. Anarchism, which Anderson defines as an “emphasis on personal liberty and autonomy” coupled with a “typical suspicion of hierarchical (bureaucratic) organization” and a “penchant for vitriolic rhetoric” (72), was inevitably an important part of these actions and discussions among elite nationalists, who may not be anarchists themselves. However, who these accomplished Filipino nationalists read and what they read about in novels, poems, and newspapers while they were in Europe matter. Europe, especially Paris, was the centre for some of the most exciting progressive thinking and literature during the late nineteenth century.

While Anderson specifically explores how inter-Hispanic affairs in the Caribbean and Catalonia can bear on national struggles in the Philippines, authors of the *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940* take on a more ambitious project to establish connections between pre-World War II anarchist and syndicalist movements in the colonial world to colonialism, national liberation, imperialism, state formation, and social revolution. They highlight relevant historical experiences that may contribute to social movements worldwide, including methods of struggle to advance their agendas. Specifically, they investigate how anarchists and syndicalists engaged with imperialism, anti-colonial movements, and the national question, given the racial and ethnic divisions in different countries. In the preface of the book, Anderson writes, “the papers in this volume certainly demonstrate that anarchism and syndicalism were important currents in anti-imperial ... struggles in the late-19th and early to mid-20th centuries” (xxxii). Anderson expresses particular intrigue with the authors’ discussion on “alliances forged between anarchists and nationalists, especially where anarchists were themselves ‘natives’” (xxiv).

Rather than fixating on Spain, where anarchism attracted mass support at the time, scholars in this edited volume (by Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt) believe that anarchism and syndicalism have made considerable inroads outside of the Iberian Peninsula. For example, Arif Dirlik argues that “[a]narchism was the dominant ideology during the first phase of socialism in Eastern Asia” (134) and “may have had the most lasting influence in China” (140) with Li Shizeng (who studied migrant societies) as a foundational figure of Chinese anarchism. Dongyoun Hwang systematically explores the development and growth of Korean anarchism and syndicalism before 1945 as transnational movements through their supranational connections and multidirectional flows across the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Dirlik

personally designed a class on Thai politics and society just for me. We met once a week, often at his house, to discuss the assigned readings, which alternated each week between Thai (with Thanet) and English (with Ben) texts (many of which are banned in Thailand). For each meeting, they expected me to write a short reflective essay on the assigned readings—in Thai for the week with Thanet and in English for the week with Ben.

For one of the sessions, Ben asked me, “Why didn’t the peasants rebel against the oppressive rulers in pre-modern Siam?” Trying to impress him with my knowledge of Marx, I answered it was due to a lack of class consciousness and/or presence of false consciousness among the Siamese peasants. He simply said “No,” then walked to the kitchen to prepare dinner. After ten minutes or so, he returned and checked whether I had figured it out. I dug into Max Weber’s grave and reasoned that peasants lacked weapons to fight against state agents who monopolized the means of violence. He softly replied “No,” without providing any explanation or hint of how to come up with a solution. He then returned to the kitchen to finish preparing our dinner. When he next returned with food in hand, I obviously feared that he would not give me dinner until I had figured out the answer. To my pleasant surprise, he handed me the dinner and sympathetically said, “N—, I don’t think that you are stupid but I don’t want you to think like a studious Cornell undergrad. Think like a peasant in pre-modern Siam.” At that moment, two things went through my mind: one, “I have never thought of myself as being stupid but now that you mention it ... hmm”; second, “Alas ... a hint!” It took me about four hours that night to come up with the answer: if peasants were unhappy, they could simply run away to the hills/jungle. They could also protest against their lords through an “everyday form of resistance” (e.g., foot-dragging, gossiping, and so forth).

today's readers will have a better understanding and appreciation of the *significance* of Rizal's and de los Reyes' works, which were written on the shoulders of other texts.

The same applies to music about intertextuality—that identification depends upon the reader's culture. When Anderson detects Javanese gamelan influence in Claude Debussy's piano music (50), he does not provide his readers a "proof" that gamelan has made its way to Paris. Had I asked him to provide evidence, I assure you that he would not tell me that Debussy, in fact, first heard gamelan music during the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition. Instead, he would reply: "Listen to this [*Pagodes*] N—, how do you NOT hear the gamelan music in this Debussy's piano music?" While still reading *Under Three Flags*, I immediately went to Barnes and Noble to purchase Debussy's piano works. Like a Jew who effortlessly recognizes Jewish folk tunes in a Mendelssohn's second violin concerto, I too heard the influence of gamelan in Debussy after my first listen.

I have learned to accept many of Ben's eccentric styles of reasoning because I have known him for more than half of my life, starting when I was still green in judgment. Throughout these years, we together have visited Rizal's home in Calamba, climbed the rice terraces in Banaue, rode on a motorcycle along the Chaophraya River in my hometown, drifted down the Mekong River along the Lao-Thai borders, roamed the back streets and bath houses of Kyoto, strolled in a botanic garden of Pasadena, danced all night in a Philadelphia suburb, and much more. At my Cornell graduation, Ben personally switched with Peter Katzenstein to hand me my diploma. A few days later, he drove me from Ithaca to the Syracuse airport and sent me off to the Brave New World. During the summer, my family and I still drive up from DC to his farmhouse in upstate New York when we can.

As a sophomore at Cornell during the waning days of the Cold War, I had the unusual privilege to study with him (and Thanet Apornsuwan of Thammasat University), who

suggests that "Tokyo served as a location for radical education and activity that is quite reminiscent of the role played by London for radicals in Europe" (133). Roaming in Tokyo (as well as San Francisco) during the early twentieth century was a well-known Japanese anarchist thinker named Kōtoku Shūsui, who had read some of Kropotkin's works while he was imprisoned for protesting against the Russo-Japanese War. He was executed later for his alleged conspiracy to assassinate the Meiji emperor.

The authors of *Social Activism in Southeast Asia* concur with Scott that Southeast Asia maintains highly controlled regimes with varying levels of democracy and forms of repression. This edited volume by Michele Ford contains empirically rich chapters on various issues related to democracy, human rights, and labour. Specifically, it includes chapters (in this order) on: the separatist movement in Aceh (Edward Aspinall), democratic movement in the Philippines (Vincent Boudreau), organic agriculture movement in Indonesia (Nicola Edwards), migrant workers' movement on the Thai-Burmese border town of Mae Sot (Dennis Arnold), labour activism in Thailand (Andrew Brown and Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya), anti-globalization movement in the Philippines (Dominique Caouette and Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem), peace movement in Timor-Leste (Thushara Dibley), sex worker rights movement in Cambodia (Larissa Sandy), sexual rights activism in Malaysia (Julian C.H. Lee), and feminist movement (vis-à-vis religious right) in Singapore (Lenore Lyons).

By stressing the importance of agency or who (e.g., middle class, farmers) mobilizes matters, these authors separately advance the study of civil society, social movements, and various forms of extra-institutional politics. In my opinion, this volume would have been ideal had either 1) the two theoretical chapters by Michele Ford and Garry Rodan effectively utilized the rich data provided by excellent contributors in the volume to build a theory to explain the origins and growth of social ac-

tivism in Southeast Asia or 2) the authors of empirical chapters engaged with Rodan's and/or Ford's theoretical propositions. Nevertheless, some generalizations on the findings of this volume can be made. In general, they have observed an absence of strong labour unions and thus a class-based mobilization in Southeast Asia. Consequently, Southeast Asian people lack a shared identity as an individual working class and seek alternative vehicles for organizing workers outside of the traditional labour unions we observe elsewhere. For these authors, the forms/modes of activism matter for whether activists pursue a reformist, policy-oriented agenda or a more radical one.

Those interested in studying marginal peoples are attracted to Anderson's and/or Scott's works, which provide ample ideas to comprehend the unexplained contemporary socio-political phenomenon that has not yet been studied. Personally, Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* has shed some light to my childhood observation of a common practice in my Singburi hometown. There, bandits from other villages would hide on desolate dirt roads and rob unsuspecting motorbikes that would happen to pass by. Once they had the motorbike, the bandits, who often lived on the outskirts of our community, would contact our village head (*phuyai ban*). Instead of trying to sell the stolen motorbike for a handsome amount of money, these bandits would ask for a modest ransom from the victim in order to return the bike. The transaction went through the victim's village head, who rarely gave out the identity of the robbers and never reported the incident to the police. These bandits lived outside the control of political centres, yet they had direct contact to powerful elites. This should not come as a surprise after reading Anderson's and Scott's works.

When I assign the works of Anderson and Scott in my graduate seminars, my students sometimes criticize these two for making unsupported connections that are central to their arguments. For example, what evidence do we have of people who actually escaped from the mandalas of the central plains

to Zomia (for they all have now successfully acculturated into the hills culture)? I explained to my students that in the summer of 1991, I met several members of the All Burmese Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) on the Thai-Burmese borders, where approximately 2,000 university students from Rangoon who had escaped military crackdown of protesters after the 8-8-88 revolution had found refuge. There, ABSDF students took me to a Mon and a Karen camp, where many resided among the ethnic minority groups, either running a clinic or teaching their children mathematics and the Burmese(!) language. These university students appeared to have accepted the lifestyle of these ethnic minority groups and lived harmoniously together with these people. From this 1991 personal experience with ABSDF students, I certainly agree with Scott that hill people also include non-primitive peoples who escaped lowland civilizing projects.

In the case of Anderson, how do we know that Filipino nationalists actually read and understood Errico Malatesta, Carlo Cafiero, Peter Kropotkin, and so forth? After all, we rarely read every book on our own bookshelves, not to mention those we have read but do not fully understand. I reminded my students that few of them have read Adam Smith, yet almost all could ably discuss Smith's key concepts and arguments about capitalism. I should also confess that I have yet to read my own book, but can certainly recite the book's key arguments. Living in a world with TV, internet, and smartphones, we sometimes forget that, in late nineteenth-century Europe, books (especially literature) seeped down to the lower classes. Since Anderson studied Classics and Literature as an undergraduate student at Cambridge University, I think what he may be doing in *Under Three Flags* is engaging his readers in what Michael Riffaterre calls "aleatory intertextuality." That is, Anderson relates the works of José Rizal and Isabelo de los Reyes to political conditions as well as other literary texts at the time (or prior), which are unlikely to be familiar to today's readers. In this way,