

Civilization and the State—Scott vs. Kropotkin

Steven Williamson (WPSA 2018)

This paper aims to put the work of James Scott in dialogue with Peter Kropotkin in the hope of teasing out the relationship between civilization and the state. Scott is not generally thought of as a political theorist, though he is well known by some social scientists. Recently however, Scott has begun to write about anarchism.¹ He also has a long-standing interest in the perspective of the weakest members of society – people often overlooked, he argues, in mainstream social science scholarship.² His more recent work applies an anarchist “squint” to various forms of state domination and what he describes as local, vernacular knowledge, or *mētis*.³ In one of these works, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, he argues that states present themselves as the bearers of civilization, and non-compliant people sometimes intentionally reject the trappings of civilization in order to avoid the state. In his most recent work Scott asserts that he equates civilization with the state “tongue in cheek”, but in doing so he suggests an underlying connection between the state and civilization. Scott's anarchist viewpoint is therefore inherently suspicious of claims about civilization.⁴ Though Scott's ironic tone suggests either that the state's claim to be the bearer of civilization is problematic, his insistence on drawing the connection suggests a deep symbiosis between the two concepts. Meanwhile, Kropotkin provides a useful counterpoint to Scott's treatment of civilization, as Kropotkin suggests that the state's relationship to civilization is partly

1 Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*; Scott, *Against the Grain*.

2 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

3 Scott, *Against the Grain*; Scott, *Seeing like a State*.

4 Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

antagonistic. For Kropotkin, the state is to civilization as a parasite is to its host. The state, by this view, is more likely to kill a civilization than to save one, and is certainly unlikely to create one.⁵

This paper will begin with a general discussion of why the idea of civilization matters, in spite of the many abuses committed in its name. Next, the paper will briefly discuss some current debates on the relationship between civilization and the state that the work of Scott and Kropotkin might illuminate. The bulk of the paper will spell out my own reading of Scott and Kropotkin on the theme of civilization and discuss the implications of their arguments. The paper will conclude with a discussion of how these findings might contribute to current debates over the connection between civilization and the state.

Why Civilization matters.

Historically civilization is an important but opaque concept. It has been used to describe the accomplishments of great artists and to justify the most grotesque acts of colonial abuse. One might fairly ask if it is salvageable as a meaningful term. Fred Dallmayr suggests that it is more a verb, or process, than a noun and that as a noun it can only really exist in the plural.⁶ Dewey argued that civilization was intimately connected with philosophy,⁷ while Adam Smith first mentions the concept in his *Wealth of Nations* in the context of caring for the sick and elderly.⁸ Smith is particularly fuzzy about the point at which a group of people becomes civilized, though he is perfectly content to describe people as more or less advanced.

5 [Kropotkin, "The State: Its Historic Role | The Anarchist Library."](#)

6 [Dallmayr, *Dialogue among Civilizations*.](#)

7 [John Dewey, *Philosophy And Civilization*.](#)

8 [Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*.](#)

Meanwhile, the modern revolutionary tract *The Coming Insurrection* suggests that civilization becomes one with the state.⁹ This makes sense, given that one sense of civilization refers specifically to the practice of rendering what had been custom a matter of the civil code. At the same time Dallmayr argues that civilization exists in permanent tension with its corollaries, nature and the divine. While Braudel suggests that civilizations are linked to geography in a way that makes the idea of a universal civilization seem nonsensical.¹⁰

Given this divergent field of meanings bundled into civilization by different thinkers, it might seem more reasonable to use terms that are less inclusive, but therefore more precise. Art, science, development, education, civil law, manners and other concepts could all be seen as part of civilization, so why not address these ideas individually with terms that might carry less imperial baggage? A partial answer to this query would be to point out that thinkers like Kropotkin invoked the idea of civilization, while being less than enthusiastic about the state – to say nothing of imperialism. A more complete answer would be to point out that for many thinkers, Scott and Kropotkin included, civilization is a process and a resulting condition that connects all of those disparate elements in a meaningful way. In other words, any given definition of civilization defines a set of elements, but also says something about their relationship to each other. In this light – civilization implies a set of relationships between people, places, practices, and technologies that no other term seems to capture completely.

Current Debates

⁹ Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*.

¹⁰ Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.

The relationship between the idea of anarchism and the concept of the state is not a purely academic question. For example, there is an ongoing debate among environmentalists and “green anarchists” about the state's ability (or inability) to deal with the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation. So called “anti-civ” anarchists take the most radical position, insisting that civilization cannot be separated from the state and must to be jettisoned along with the state. On the other hand, there are nations (people) who lack states and who therefore see themselves as the defenders of their civilizations against the encroachments of the states that would govern them. On one side there is an argument equating the state with civilization and on the other the suggestion that civilization must be defended from the state.

What is at stake, when we consider whether civilization is seen as integral to or distinct from the state, becomes clear when considering the strongest possible formulation of the anti-civilization argument. According to this account, human societies have been organized into bands, tribes, chiefdoms, or civilizations, reflecting an increasing level of control and hierarchy. By this argument it is nonsensical to talk about civilization without a state of some kind, as the complexity associated with civilization and the hierarchy associated with the state are inextricably linked.¹¹ Some take a more nuanced view, suggesting that cities are the highest expression of civilization, but nonetheless a toxic and fundamentally alienating expression. However, even this position acknowledges that a few civilizations were not entirely identified with the rise of cities, though these are considered anomalous.¹²

Of course some would assert that the question is moot, as cities, civilization, and the

11 See for example, Killjoy, “Anarchism Versus Civilization.”

12 “Alone Together: The City and Its Inmates | The Anarchist Library.”

state are here to stay, and can adapt to overcome the challenges presented by climate change, environmental degradation, and rising inequality. Others, however suspect that something in this formula has to be changed. This line of argument points to the inadequacy of measures like riding a bike to work, when in fact this does nothing to change the fundamental way we relate to the urban space which is still driven by cars and massive quantities of pavement.¹³ If the current relationship between the state, cities, and our civilization is unsustainable, it would be useful to understand how these concepts are connected. Though anti-civ anarchists and some mainstream political theorists suggest that civilization is intimately connected with the city, it is not entirely clear that people lacking cities should be considered uncivilized or that they would identify themselves as uncivilized. Furthermore, the concept of the city is itself something of a moving target – many of the early cities often associated with the emergence of civilization had populations that would today be comparable to a village or small town.¹⁴

Other thinkers, while acknowledging the link between the state and some versions of civilization, claim that decentralization and democracy can produce a different kind of civilization. Abdullah Ocalan, considered by many to be the intellectual leader of the transnational Kurdish independence movement, argues that “democratic confederalism” can foster a different kind of civilization and spread across national borders by a process of free association.¹⁵ This type of confederation and its attendant civilization would then, if needed, defend itself against encroachments from the state and state-based civilization. Again, the

13 “Bicycles and Civilization | The Anarchist Library.”

14 See for example, <https://www.ancient.eu/city/>

15 Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, 25–32.

specific relationship between the state and civilization is not fully specified. Civilization in all of these accounts speaks to the complexity of human social arrangements, but the accounts disagree over the extent to which civilization is connected to specific practices and whether civilization necessarily implies hierarchy and dominance.

Scott and Civilization

Scott offers an interesting perspective on the relationship of civilization to the state. This is in part because he is, by his own account, an almost accidental anarchist. Nevertheless, though he does not seek to argue a coherent unifying theory of anarchism (and mistrusts such theories more generally) he does articulate a clear, provocative argument for the connection between the state and civilization. Namely, he suggests that the state promotes civilization because the central features of civilization, such as literacy, law, and technology, promote a kind of standardization that is invaluable to the state. That is, civilization promotes ways of being that allow human activity to be captured by a simplified, synoptic, and centralized view of the world. The implication in this is that civilization tends not to spread customs that encourage locally unique practices. Local (or vernacular) practices tend to work against civilization, by this view, because they require some degree of local knowledge and are therefore a bother to the centralized administration of the state. Scott uses many different examples to underline this theme, which he explores repeatedly in his recent work,¹⁶ but there are examples around us, should we choose to look for them.

For example, in recent years the Irish postal service, An Post, rolled out a new system

16 Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*; Scott, *Seeing like a State*.

of addresses intended to apply a unique identifier to every address in the country. This was to eliminate the problem that in many parts of Ireland there were no addresses homes and mail would be delivered by the person's name and town. This was especially a problem for people who had common Irish names, like Patrick Murphy.¹⁷ The state's goal was to take a system that required local postmen to have a detailed knowledge of their community and replace it with a system that would make postmen interchangeable. Civilization, by Scott's argument, is just this process. Local knowledge is replaced by standardized systems that operate well from a centralized perspective that emphasizes uniformity and visual order. In a sense it moves us ever closer to becoming (or being replaced by) robots. It is often assumed, at least among political scientists, that people generally embrace such moves towards standardization and efficiency, if only because they make the world less confusing.

Scott's view, is that by adopting an anarchist perspective we suddenly see that people do not automatically support or enjoy these moves towards standardization. To begin with, the plans of central administrators frequently do not fit the real world particularly well. In the case of the new Irish post codes, Eircode, many complained that the system lacked basic features that would make it intuitively obvious, like grouping similar numeric addresses together.¹⁸ But beyond the problems of implementing any particular scheme of standardization, Scott suggests that an anarchist perspective helps clarify the ways that people evade, push back against, or subvert centralize schemes of order. Sometimes this might be done in ways that are hidden and therefore not obvious at first glance. At other times resistance may be playful. In the case of the An Post and the new Eircode, some Irish

17 Fleisher, "The Irish Post Office Has a Plan To Tell One Murphy From Another."

18 McGee, "New Postal Location Code System to Be Launched in July."

residents had a bit of fun – not only eschewing the use of the codes, but using deliberately vague and playful addresses. For example, one woman sent a Christmas card to a friend addressed to, “You know yer wan, her mothers Hogan from Castleblakeney, but the daughter’s an ex-townie. Grew up in Athlone and moved to Ballymacward (Between Ballinasloe and Galway) when she got married. Lives next door to her in-laws now. She has a rake a’ childer and 7 dogs and 4 cats and about 30 hens and ducks and some rabbits and fish and I think she has a hamster as well. She has a shrine to the Virgin Mary in the left corner of her garden. Can you give her this please? Thanks xxx” The recipient was immediately obvious to the local postman.¹⁹

Sometimes such addresses are not necessarily jokes, but may instead be merely descriptive, such as, “Your man Henderson, that boy with the glasses who is doing the PhD up there at Queen's in Belfast.”²⁰ But in other cases the intention of the letter writer is clearly to test the limits of An Post by deliberately ignoring the official system. One man constructed a series of difficult to deliver letters which included a letter in the form of a die (as in, the singular of dice) and various puzzles, including a letter with the address written on a jigsaw puzzle in an attached bag, and another where the address was a crossword. Most of these were in fact delivered, with postal workers even dedicating their own time to solving the puzzles.²¹ In Scott's eyes, this is more than a funny human-interest story. Scott's reading would suggest that the writers of these obscure addresses and the postal workers who take up the challenge are in fact playing a game that simultaneously expresses their boredom with

19 “Irish Postman Delivers Christmas Card with Hilarious Address.”

20 Imgur, “Irish Mail - This Piece of Mail Was Delivered to the Right Place with No Address, Just a Description of the Recipient and the Town He’s Living In.”

21 “Mind Blowing Mail: The Irishman Who Took on the Postal Service - BBC News.”

the standardized modes of civilization and their desire to push back, if only a little, at the centralized administration of their lives. They are doing exactly the opposite of what Eircode aims to accomplish, they are relying on local knowledge and inefficient, non-standardized practices.

Thus, the state seeks to impose standardized order to facilitate central management, but people push back against this in a variety of ways. From Scott's anarchist perspective, escaped slaves hiding in swamps, indigenous people fleeing colonial settlements, workers engaging a 'work to rule' action, and the Irish avoiding standardized postal codes all share one thing in common, they are resisting a centralized order imposed by a hierarchy. Typically, this centralized hierarchical order is identified with the state (the ultimate expression of hierarchical order). *The Art* presents Scott's clearest articulation of the link between civilization's homogenizing tendencies and the expansion of state control. While Scott recognizes variation in what it meant to be civilized across time and place, he asserts that the really essential and common characteristics of civilization were residence within state-administered space and sedentary agriculture.²² In Scott's narrative, the state becomes the arbiter of civilization and defines it according to its own needs. This produces a stark dividing line between civilized and non-civilized people and areas. Those who would avoid the state are therefore forced to forgo civilization as well and embrace barbarism as a conscious choice. So, Scott contends, those who would avoid the state would go so far as to abandon literacy and written records that might provide the basis for state administration of births, deaths, marriages, property ownership, and so forth. While Scott's argument is in

²² Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 119.

some ways compelling, he does not really discuss whether those who were avoiding the state might consider *themselves* civilized.

Still, for Scott, civilization tends largely towards the homogenization of landscapes, people, and technology. Scott adds to the debate a specific set of opposed concepts that define civilization and what he describes as “deliberate and reactive statelessness”. But Scott's division between stateless barbarians-by-choice and the civilized people of the state is not defined by the primitive vs. the modern, or by the relative autonomy of the two populations alone. Rather, his division depends on the kinds of knowledge that the two groups rely on. As mentioned above, states prefer a synoptic view of the world and therefore prefer technologies and practices that erase local distinctions. Like the Eircode, these synoptic views and practices are intended to reduce the territory to a uniform field of operation for the state and its functionaries. Civilization is therefore inextricably linked to knowledge that seeks universal rules, and will remake the world to fit those rules whenever it can. Scott calls this technical knowledge *techne*. Additionally, however, he posits that resistance to civilization (or the evasion of civilization) depends on what he variously calls, local knowledge, vernacular knowledge, or *mētis*. This kind of knowledge is not intended to be universal. It is intended to build from the ground up and provide a set of rough and ready rules that allow people to negotiate similar, but never identical, circumstances. It takes as its starting point the pre-existing relationships of the natural world and builds off of them, but it also takes the same approach to social relationships. While *techne* (universal knowledge) assumes that the world can be reduced to quantitative data, *mētis* (local knowledge) is predicated on a qualitative, relational view of the world.

For Eircode the object was to assign a specific unique number to each address. However, the letter writers referenced above and the local postman actually relied on a qualitative knowledge of individuals (“that boy with the glasses”) and their relationships within the community (“Lives next door to her in-laws now”). As many anarchist thinkers point out,²³ people lived outside of states for millennia, but Scott adds a framework that connects the social and natural world with a specific way of seeing and acting. It suggests the kind of mail delivery problems faced by An Post, in spite of the formal system that was meant to render local knowledge superfluous. In the natural world, Scott points to the agricultural practices of pre-modern societies. One of his favorite examples is a bit of indigenous American folk wisdom suggesting that corn should be planted when the oak leaves are the size of a squirrel's ear.²⁴ This would not seem practical to anyone who lacks a solid sense of how big a squirrel's ear is, or has no idea when the leaves begin to appear on the oak trees. It implies an intimate relationship with nature. By contrast, for those of us indoctrinated into a scientific view of the world, we would expect that it would be easier and better to figure out an actual date that could be set on the calendar as the day for planting. However, Scott points out, setting a specific date based on historical weather patterns would ignore both annual and geographical variations. In a cold year or on the north side of a hill the ground temperature might be far too cold on the date specified by the sophisticated weather model. On a local level the oak trees do a better job of monitoring ground temperature than the state agricultural experts do.

23 Springer, *The Anarchist Roots of Geography*.

24 Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*; This is an example Scott relies on frequently. See, Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*.

The set of binary relations that Scott proposes to distinguish civilization and barbarism are not (even in his own work) particularly satisfying as descriptors of actual life. After all, the local postal workers delivering mail based on local knowledge in the examples above are in fact employees of a national mail service, which is an arm of the state and presumably part of civilization. The line between the state and non-state spaces was always a bit fuzzy. Now the whole world is ostensibly incorporated into one state or another with very few exceptions, but the tension Scott describes in *The Art* continues. So the distinction between state-civilization and non-state/non-civilization that Scott draws is probably more useful as a set of opposing horizons, rather than as binary categories. In other words, we would be hard pressed to point to an example of pure state avoidance, but we might also find few examples where the best laid plans of technocrats are implemented without some push back. Much of Scott's work focuses on this point precisely – the centralized, synoptic view of the technocrat tends to prioritize visual order and quantification while the lived experiences of actual people see the world from the apparent chaos of the sidewalk, which in fact represents its own order.

In some sense, this is like Henri Bergson's observation about a disordered room.²⁵

When a person enters a room expecting to see books on shelves and clothes in drawers but instead sees clothes and books intermingled on the floor, she might say that the room is disordered. Bergson suggests that it might make more sense to say that the room is ordered in a way that was unexpected. State administrators anticipate visual order, single use zoning, and standardized patterns of life as the ideal. Upon discovering any variation from that ideal, they see only chaos. Meanwhile the view from the street judges the immediate environment

²⁵ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*.

based on its functionality, the relationships between places and people, and local (or vernacular) knowledge that is ordinarily qualitative. The examples cited thus far do not exhaust Scott's catalog of local practices that the state and civilization (by his account) seek to replace with more standardized, universal systems. Still, even more examples can be found almost anywhere, should one choose to look. In Rhode Island there are official street names everywhere and theoretically giving directions to strangers ought to be simple, but people often do not know the street names and instead offer cryptic directions based on landmarks that *used to be there*. For an outsider it is hard to imagine a less helpful system, but for locals it proves an immensely effective system. Scott's goal is to direct scholarly attention to that other, local, unanticipated order.

Kropotkin and Civilization

It is necessary to begin by noting that Kropotkin suffered the western myopia common to his time regarding the ideas of civilization and barbarism, and largely overlooked the role of women in society.²⁶ Nevertheless, he values the idea of civilization in a way that other anarchists do not and offers an interesting counterpoint to Scott's perspective.

Kropotkin portrays civilization in two ways. First he uses civilization in a teleological sense, the way Scott and others do, speaking of more and less civilized peoples. Second, he suggests that civilizations are linked to particular places. In the first sense, he suggests that civilization emerges from society and that society passes through set stages. So for example,

²⁶ MacLaughlin, *Kropotkin and the Anarchist Intellectual Tradition*, 101.

he suggests that one can understand the origins of European civilization by studying the legal and social traditions of the barbarians who preceded it (the Germans, Slavs, Scandinavians), but also by studying contemporary peoples who shared that same level of development (“Kaybles, Mongols, Hindus, and Africans”).²⁷ This reflects both the bias of western thought, suggesting that non-western peoples are less advanced, and the idea that human development occurs in stages and that a given stage can be compared across place and time unproblematically.

Taking only this point it would seem that Kropotkin adds little to Scott's (or others') description of civilization. At other times, however, Kropotkin makes claims that indicate that civilization can be both locally conditioned and that it can exist by different standards in different forms. For example, he criticizes those for whom “the soldier's uniform and the barrack mess-table are civilization's last word”²⁸ and speaks in various places of both modern and middle-class civilization as distinct, but not necessarily better than, other manifestations of civilization.²⁹ In fact, undermining the notion of a teleological sense of civilization, Kropotkin asserts that the highest achievements of European civilization were produced during the period of free city states, prior to the advent of the modern nation-state.³⁰ Additionally, Kropotkin suggests, when arguing against the notion of private property, that the products of civilization in a given place, Paris, are “the fruit of eighteen centuries of toil, the work of fifty generations of the whole French nation.”³¹ Even if civilization is viewed as a more general process, distinct forms of civilization can exist as heritage for a specific group of

27 Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role | The Anarchist Library,” 10.

28 Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, 63.

29 Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*; See for example, Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role | The Anarchist Library.”

30 Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role | The Anarchist Library.”

31 Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, 78.

people.

Interdependence seems to define civilization as a general process for Kropotkin.³² Presumably, this would include the division of labor (as tasks), but for Kropotkin this does not necessarily mean a permanent division of laborers.³³ From division of labor, some anti-civilization anarchists would suggest, there is an inevitable slide into hierarchy, modern capitalism, and state domination (our current situation). Still, as noted above, Kropotkin maintains that the apogee of the European civilization is not the current age, but occurred in the free cities of Europe between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.³⁴

That specific claim is clearly open to debate, but more interesting is the basis on which Kropotkin grounds his claim. He concedes that the production of goods in the modern age is more rapid, but maintains that the quality of the goods produced has declined. In other words, his standard for civilization is qualitative, rather than quantitative. For Kropotkin, civilization is not only about grand buildings like St. Mark's in Venice, but also about the amount of decorative finish that a workman would put into everyday objects, like “a railing, a candlestick, or a piece of pottery.”³⁵ The proliferation of decorative elements in turn means that workers were not hurried and worked at a pace that allowed them time for creativity. Civilization is therefore not only distinguished by interdependence, but by the quality of labor and the conditions of life.

Furthermore, Kropotkin argues that human progress is built through the innumerable and anonymous contributions of humanity and so belongs to all. At the same time he

32 Kropotkin, 49.

33 Kropotkin, 178–79.

34 Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role | The Anarchist Library.”

35 Kropotkin, 17.

suggests that the adaptation and adoption of any innovation ought to be a voluntary matter, but suggests that imitation of successful social and technological models will occur on a voluntary basis. Moreover, he has great faith in cooperative coordination and innovation, which he suggests will lead to better outcomes than a centralized state would produce. Cooperative coordination and innovation, by Kropotkin's account, is the product of free associations. These grow naturally out of civilization³⁶ and at the same time rely on local knowledge and local cooperation, rather than centralized coordination and standardized technology.³⁷ To sum up, to the extent that civilization produces standardized solutions to technical problems it does not necessarily impose those solutions. Also, civilization can best be gauged by the quality of its products³⁸ and the extent to which it allows free and creative production.

Civilization and interdependence for Kropotkin do not inevitably imply domination or the centralization of power. For Kropotkin, the state emerges as a threat to the highest form of civilization and provides at best a brake against civilization or at worst its destruction. He argues that throughout history the appearance of the state signals the death knell of civilization, not its health.³⁹

Civilization and the State

36 Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*.

37 Kropotkin, 129–30.

38 Here, by my reading, Kropotkin does not take “quality” to simply mean “durability” but also a set of characteristics that might be better described by 'skill' or 'workmanship'. Clearly the contest between quality and quantity has many dimensions that correspond to the various interpretations of civilization. For example, Adam Smith and Marx both suggest that the increase in the quantity of goods produced corresponds with an increase in civilization, and in Smith's case this is specifically connected to the ability of a civilization to care for the sick and the elderly. Furthermore, the relationship between centralization, quantity, and quality could be elaborated on through a comparison of centralized versus decentralized systems, following the arguments of Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed*.

39 Kropotkin, “The State: Its Historic Role | The Anarchist Library.”

Though Scott and Kropotkin differ fundamentally on the relationship between civilization and the state, there are points of agreement in their work. First, both acknowledge that civilization allows for the accumulation of goods that the state can appropriate. Second, both argue that in remaking the world according to centralized plans, the state destroys things of value that are perhaps only visible from a local perspective.

Scott argues that the state looks across any given territory first to see what resources are available to appropriate and second to remake the landscape in order to facilitate the accumulation of more resources. These resources could include anything of value to the state, including human beings, who might be forced into labor and/or concentrated in places convenient for the state. In Scott's narrative cities are generally products of states or proto-states. The state's appropriation of resources inevitably changes the environment, but particularly does so when the state intervenes to remake the terrain to facilitate appropriation. So, for example, Scott points to state forest management in Germany. The forests were the source of many and varied goods to the local people, who in turn, had intimate first-hand knowledge of the flora, fauna, and terrain. Forests provided locals with foods, medicines, shelter, herbs, etc. For the German state, however, the only real concern was lumber. First the state's agents went through and cataloged the valuable trees in the forest, and later they clearcut the land and replanted the forests only with the valuable species. This entailed the destruction of entire natural environments and resources that were essential to local communities based around local knowledge and practices. For Scott, the state advanced civilization with a synoptic, quantitative view of the world and destroyed a way of life that was based in qualitative understanding.

Kropotkin would agree that the state destroys more local ways of life through the imposition of centralized, standardized control, though he would draw the line on civilization differently. For Kropotkin, the state emerges and seeks to capture the wealth of society that has built up in social forms that the state had no hand in crafting. States, for example, crushed the free cities, their trade federations, and their guilds, capturing their wealth in the process. What was lost was not only material wealth, but also the social relations and institutions associated with those places, which included unique forms of law, dispute resolution, trade, communal support, information sharing, skills, and so on. These were all, for better or worse, negotiated locally but were replaced by the edicts of the state and standardized practices that were only possible within the state. So even the benefits of non-coercive coordination that Kropotkin describes can be co-opted to some extent by the emerging state, even if the state destroys the basis for that coordination in doing so.

The fundamental disagreement between Scott and Kropotkin is on the role of the state. For Scott the state is the promoter of civilization, which implies standardization and a synoptic view of the world. For Kropotkin the centralized administrative state is a parasite, that feeds off of civilization but does little to help build it. The key questions embedded here are: is civilization is a top-down or bottom-up process? Is it imposed or adopted freely? Is it quantitative and standardized or qualitative and vernacular? This is not to say that the answer must be one or the other – it could be that civilization has different modes. In fact, I will argue that the options described above only make sense in certain combinations and people are describing two different phenomena when they talk about civilization. Kropotkin uses civilization in both senses, while only one of these aligns with what Scott describes as

civilization. Whether both are called civilization or not is to some extent a matter of semantics. But this conceptual distinction is important for an understanding of how the kind of interdependent complexity that produces the goods we associate with civilization is possible and to what extent the modern state can be removed from that process. Kropotkin captures a more complete picture of how civilization is invoked, but provides an incomplete picture of why one mode of civilization should be preferred to the other. By contrast Scott, in *The Art*, does a very good job of detailing the limitations of one mode of civilization, but completely excludes any other mode from consideration. I would propose therefore that by overlaying the two, we might see the area covered within Kropotkin's definition of civilization, but excluded by Scott, with the same conceptual clarity that Scott provides for the concept of state-affiliated civilization.

This paper will now explore Kropotkin's vision of the type of civilization that would exist in and among free cities. I argue here that if it is possible, this would be a bottom-up, freely adopted, qualitative-vernacular mode of civilization. Such a mode of civilization would have limits different from those of a universal centralized version of civilization. These differences have implications for contemporary discussions of states' ability to offer meaningful change. To begin with, it should be noted that state-based civilization has certain benefits, that even critics like Scott and Kropotkin acknowledge. Kropotkin points out that within the state-based system the quantity of things produced increases while the quality declines. This is not to say that the ability to produce larger quantities of goods is in itself a bad thing. In many cases the ability to produce larger quantities of things is positive, but Kropotkin suggests that the problem is in the trade off. The ability of the current state-based

civilizations to produce large quantities of things does not adequately offset the decline in quality, the degradation of labor, and the loss of autonomy. Scott even more explicitly recognizes that state-based systems have benefits. While he suggests that something of local value is lost when roads are renamed by a centralized bureaucracy, he also acknowledges that in the event of a car accident, having an unambiguous, standardized system of road names allows the rescue workers to know the exact spot of an accident. So a quantitative, synoptic view of the world is not without its benefits.

By the same token, bottom up, freely adopted, and local-vernacular solutions cannot easily produce large quantities of manufactured goods or might generate local systems of road naming that would confound emergency responses. Imagine a call telling emergency personnel that a car has crashed in front of “where Joe's coffee shop used to be.” The most extreme version of this would reject quantification completely. Like the Borges character who by accident acquired astonishing powers of memory and began giving proper names to numbers,⁴⁰ a civilization that eschewed any attempts at standardization and quantification would not be able to function. In the most extreme case each person would live on an island of meaning not shared with anyone else. Of course, a civilization that reduced everything to quantification would be equally dysfunctional. The point is that they would be dysfunctional in different ways. At least when considering qualitative and quantitative ways of thinking, there is no real option to use one or the other exclusively. The issue is rather which one takes precedence. If a more quantitative, synoptic (and therefore centralized) perspective is adopted, the greater the quantity of things that can be produced. This seems obvious on some level.

40 Borges, Gibson, and Maurois, *Labyrinths*, 59–66.

But the correlated decline in quality may be less obvious. Still Kropotkin was not alone in pointing this out. Consider for example Trotsky's observation that the centralization of the Soviet economy allowed it to produce a staggering quantity of industrial goods, but the quality of those goods rendered many of them useless. Conversely, I argue, a system which shifts to a more qualitative, vernacular (and therefore local) perspective may produce fewer things that are of a higher quality, but even the measurement of that quality may shift from one place to another.

For example, if a qualitative focus leads us to reconsider the conditions of work, that does not mean that all communities will focus on the same aspects of work. Work could be made safer, more exciting, creative, or as light as possible, depending on the qualities by which it is judged. Not all standards are even compatible – making work more creative and exciting might run squarely against the desire to make it safer. So empowering communities to innovate their own rules and ways of doing things would lead to more of a patchwork of practices and standards across communities. This centrifugal force would not necessarily win out in all cases. Some communities would doubtless imitate successful ideas from neighboring communities or federate over certain issues, as occurred with the Hanseatic league. If humanity were to move away from the nation-state and toward self-governing communities with only voluntary connections, it is probable that some current practices would continue as before. Others would almost certainly change. Looking at Kropotkin and Scott together, some general trends emerge. As Scott points out, the state does not act evenly across issues and territory. Some places and things the state is content to leave to chance, while others the state actively promotes and manages. In the absence of the state, it is

supposed by all (not least those within the state itself) that these things would be left to fall apart.

“Who will pave the roads?” is a question often put to anarchists. Rather than trying to answer this question, which is clearly rhetorical, it is interesting to unpack its assumptions. First it assumes that paved roads are absolutely essential to our current way of life, second it assumes that the state is necessary to accomplish this pavement, and thirdly it suggests that anyone who suggests an alternative to the state in its current form must explain how the new arrangement will produce identical results to the ones achieved currently by the state. The first two assumptions seem valid enough, but the third assumption presupposes universal agreement over the desirability of our current system. Those who would dispute the third assumption point out the massive environmental cost of paving vast portions of the globe, the environmental damage associated with cars, etc.⁴¹ Additionally, the priority placed on pavement, particularly dedicated to cars, betrays a concentration of state resources that advantages some people in the community and disadvantages others. When it comes to cars (and therefore drivers), anarchy presents too great a risk, but for pedestrians, the state is generally much less fixated on assuring the maintenance of pedestrian ways (and therefore the movement of pedestrians).

This difference between the way the state values cars and the way the state values pedestrians becomes clear if we shift the pro-state question from the preceding paragraph. Instead of “Who will pave the roads?” one might ask (in places where there is snow), “Who will plow the roads?” But it is hard to picture a pro-state argument that would begin with

41 See for example, “Bicycles and Civilization | The Anarchist Library.”

“Who will shovel the sidewalks?” At least in the United States this is an unlikely starter, as in many cities the state has nothing to do with clearing sidewalks. It is true that there are some ordinances about snow removal and in many places these stipulate that the owner of the abutting property must clear the snow, but such ordinances are unevenly enforced. In the narrow streets of older cities, the plowing of the streets means burying the sidewalks, as there is just nowhere else to put the snow. In such cases those who walk must either tunnel their way along the sidewalk, or they must walk out in the street and risk being run over.

Pedestrians are therefore reduced to second-class citizenship. The state fixates on the car and allows anarchy on the sidewalks, tacitly acknowledging either that pedestrians don't matter, or that the resources of the community suffice to take care of pedestrians' needs through very low-tech, localized action.

If the state were absent from the picture the scene would likely change, but it is unlikely that all of the things that we associate with civilization would automatically disappear. Taking transportation infrastructure alone for the moment, if some states are content to leave sidewalks in the purview of residents or tramlines in the hands of independent authorities, then it seems unlikely that the maintenance of such things (or even their construction) would be impossible without the state. Other infrastructure, however, the state maintains and promotes in a more aggressive way. Principle among these (at least in some countries) is pavement and highways for automobiles. It is unlikely that in the absence of the state that roadways would be maintained at the same levels, or that more would be built aggressively into areas where there are not populations to support them. If we imagine a

world without a state (at least as we know it) where local populations are responsible to building and maintaining infrastructure, we would likely see a shift in emphasis from creating large areas that are all equally navigable by car to prioritizing the quality of local transport and amenities, including sidewalks, bike paths, etc. This is not to say that people would willingly give up their cars, but rather that if local communities were forced to take care of their own roads, they might all come up with different solutions. Some communities might remain very car friendly, and others would likely go in a more pedestrian-oriented direction.

One aspect of the link between state and civilization⁴² is the fact that the state manages the maintenance of infrastructure that allows people living in “advanced” nations⁴³ to take for granted the infrastructure, technologies, institutions, and legal framework that makes a civilized (highly interdependent) existence possible. In doing so, it also creates the illusion that people are much more independent than they actually are. Shifting the responsibility for maintaining these infrastructures, technologies, institutions, and legal frameworks back towards local communities would inevitably force individuals to become aware, and stay aware, of the complications involved in sustaining current ways of life. Individuals would also more likely see the impact of those infrastructures, technologies, institutions, and legal frameworks on the human and natural environment.

Again, imagine that local communities were empowered to make their own decisions about what kind of roadways, sidewalks, and bike paths they want to build. Such an arrangement would make it more difficult to build beautiful city centers that consume

42 For example, see the discussion of highway names referenced above in Scott, Two Cheers for Anarchism.

43 “advanced” being the modern equivalent of “highly civilized”

massive resources while shunting their power generation, garbage disposal, and massive swathes of pavement in the form of highways and strip malls into surrounding communities. In one of its more perverse twists, the regime of state-backed private property (at the core of our current legal and economic system) began by assuming that nature was worthless, only to acknowledge in practice that nature is of great value. The most expensive real estate comes with a view of a park, a forest, mountains, a lake, or the sea. Kropotkin argues that real estate values in urban environments is not explicable in terms of the materials used to build the structures, but in the value of the land, which is valued because of the work that untold people have done to make the city. The state, by providing a uniform territory that can be owned, bought, sold, and developed according to a standardized set of guidelines assures those who occupy beautiful urban spaces (made beautiful mostly by the work of previous generations and the luxurious preservation of contact with nature) that the ugliness of mass production and state-based civilization can be located elsewhere. In contrast to NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) it's IYBY (In Your Back Yard). If all communities were making their own decisions about where and how to live, such externalities would be harder to negotiate.

To the question, "Who will pave the roads?" the answer may well depend on circumstances. Some roads would go unpaved. However, dialing back some aspects of our current civilization does not necessarily mean the reversal of all elements that might be included in a working definition of civilization. Again, looking to sidewalks, in some places the state takes a leading role in the maintenance of sidewalks, which is clearly good from the standpoint of standardization, which in turn is good for the elderly, people with mobility issues, and those with visual impairment. In other places, by contrast, the sidewalks can vary

quite a bit. Some are smooth concrete, some are rough, some are asphalt, and some sidewalks are even covered in tile. In some places the sidewalks are not a uniform height above the street, requiring the addition of a step here and there. Even in a single neighborhood, there will be some sidewalks that are paved all the way to the curb and others leave a strip of grass. In some spots that sidewalk disappears and a grassy patch occupies the room that had originally been designated as a sidewalk.

Thus within the space of a block we might encounter great variation in a relatively mundane feature of the landscape. We associate some degree of regularity with the concept of civilization – some set of standards or rules that allow people to interact in complex and interdependent ways. It does not follow, however, that there is not limit to the correlation between regularity and complex interdependence. The more a territory is standardized, the more simplified acting across that territory becomes. The complexity of modern state-based civilization expands over territory while creating an increasingly homogeneous landscape that is complex *only* in terms of its interdependence. It is a civilization that simultaneously approaches worldwide dominance and reduces any distinctive characteristics of the places in that world. Of course, there are places where difference is tolerated – or even mandated. But these are typically historic districts, which increasingly seem to be the taxidermied remains of an earlier manifestation of civilization that is now preserved by play-acting. Not all of the homogenizing influences of modern civilization are state-administered. The “soft power” of nation-states is often as effective, or more effective, than any kind of regulation. But, at critical points the power of the state intercedes to make sure that the soft power moves freely.

Hollywood releases movies all around the world, but it is state-administered copyright law

that makes that possible.

Assuming a fully anarchist civilization along the lines suggested by Kropotkin would mean the absence of any coercive authority, but would not mean that centers of culture and learning would disappear. Culture and learning would be more diffuse, but cities would continue to exist and civilization might flourish in a qualitative sense. Civilization in a quantitative sense would, however, decline. The experience of daily life would become more chaotic, but more creative. It is challenging to imagine a world with cities but no states without imagining the world before the state, before the treaty of Westphalia. But the benefit of an anarchist epistemological position, Scott argues, is not confined to those who believe the state is evil and/or unnecessary. Rather, imagining the world without states and attending to the areas where the state intervenes and does not intervene, allows one to see the opportunity costs associated with an increasingly uniform, technological state-administered world.

The examples given to this point (postal systems, forestry management, street names, sidewalks) are all somewhat obvious areas of state involvement in daily life. Less obvious, but still very real, are the state's attempts to manipulate, control, or limit more abstract aspects of civilization. Language springs to mind as a key example that has been subjected to varying levels of state control and interference. It is no secret that the idea of stable national languages has been largely a project of the state. As the old adage runs, "the difference between a dialect and a language is that the latter controls an army and a navy." But states have varied in their approach to the regulation of language. In France and Spain the state intervened (and continues to intervene) to enforce standardized spellings and grammar. English, by comparison, is a chaotic mess. Saxon and French words continue to duke it out on

a daily basis, and new arrivals daily crowd the field. The worst aspect of this chaos, from the perspective of those who prefer order, is the tangle of English spelling rules, or perhaps the absence of real rules. While the French were busy standardizing their language the English were busy stealing French words using both old and new spellings, with Saxon orthography mixed in for good measure.

Is French therefore more “civilized” than English? Many have thought so, and Scott's description of civilization would support this. Others, however, would argue that English is more interesting, more alive, and more fun for all of its chaos, vernacular quirks, and local variations. To ask what would civilization look like without a state could be reframed as, what if sidewalks, postal codes, highways, forest management, and so forth, were treated more like language? Language can be state-administered, but it needn't be. Some states do not find it necessary to manage language. Before states, it was not always the case that conquered peoples were forced to adopt the language of their conquerors. The Visigoths became latinized, while some Norsemen who conquered parts of Scotland and Ireland eventually became Gaelicized. Absent state direction, languages evolve. They are adopted, abandoned, and/or combined in a wide variety of ways. Where the state does not see a vital interest in maintaining uniformity, our current civilization similarly lacks central direction. Sidewalks in many places are less important (from the state's perspective) than streets, and therefore are less standardized. If the state were absent (or constrained) a similarly decentralized process might cause currently standardized systems to evolve more like language. Imagine if each time we crossed a linguistic frontier we also encountered distinctive transportation systems, architecture, art, and so on, in place of the current experience of global chains and glass/steel

buildings that might serve any purpose.

Of course, Kropotkin's vernacular civilization leaves room for the spread of particular practices between civilizations, but this is voluntary and would still allow for more variation in the particularities of civilization from place to place. More effort would therefore need to be expended on translation between systems. The top-down vision of civilization necessitates whole professions whose job it is to promote efficiency by removing "friction" from the system. These sources of friction include local customs, norms, and practices that prevent the seamless integration of territories into one (eventual) global field. The bottom-up view of this situation would suggest that all of the sources of "friction" are in fact the core of civilization—the product of generations of human activity in specific places that connect the people, their culture, and their land in a meaningful way. Again, looking to language, it might be that a small Gaelic-speaking hamlet on the Irish coast can gain a better position in the world economy by abandoning their traditional language. If we take civilization to mean the reduction of people and territories to more uniform and centralizable standards, they might even become more civilized by abandoning Gaelic and adopting English. But this is clearly questionable. The main thing that makes one language preferable to another from the standpoint of standardization and centralization is the number of people who speak it and the relative power of the linguistic groups. In no other respect is English better than Gaelic, Castilian superior to Catalan, or French preferable to Euskara.

This is not to say that we cannot imagine language being redesigned to be more straightforward and standardized. Esperanto was certainly motivated, at least in part by such a drive. The most ambitious positivist visions saw language itself being reduced to numbers,

which may yet be possible, if not really desirable. Electronic devices that can reduce English to formulas and spit French out the other side (and vice versa) are, from the standpoint of synoptic civilization, more civilized than the people who use them. This is not because the people no longer bother to learn another language (which people of old might have suggested), but because the people in this scenario are now the part of the system that is disconnected, antiquated, and inefficient. If civilization means centralization, quantification, and a synoptic perspective, it must become progressively less human as it loses its local and vernacular character.

A civilization that begins with, and sustains, the local and the vernacular would then likely imply several potential negatives: less economic efficiency, a greater diversity in everything from roadways to property law, and a corresponding need to bridge the gaps between divergent approaches to transportation, communication, law, and the like. However, such civilization (or perhaps *civilizations*) would also be likely to promote innovation, experimentation, and aesthetic creativity at the local level in a way that a centralized and standardized civilization does not. It is also likely, as centralized solutions to local problems would be less easily promulgated, that communities would be more inclined to seek the means to surmount challenges (whether technical or social) using local resources that are near to hand.

Implications

The notion that civilization is better and healthier when connected to complex interdependence at the level of the city rather than the state, is a useful starting point to think

through what civilization is and what it does. What this means for current debates over the current and future state of civilization is less obvious. Can we have civilization without the state? The answer, according to Kropotkin, is yes. In fact, he suggests, we would have a better civilization. Nonetheless, we do have the state, and the civilization that currently goes with the modern state is unsustainable. A discussion of what might have been had free cities triumphed instead of the state, like all counterfactuals, only gets us so far. Beginning from now, does the idea of vernacular, non-state civilization mean anything?

Thinking of environmental challenges, for example, there are a number of possibilities moving forward. The state will either survive or not. If it survives it will either evolve into something different (fostering a new kind of civilization that allows us to surmount coming challenges) or it may kill us all. If the state as we know it devolves or fails, it could result in apocalyptic outcomes as well. Scott, in spite of his critiques of the state, suggests that it is here to stay. Furthermore he suggests that state-sponsored standardization is useful for some things, such as uniform highway names and mile markers that allow paramedics to find the exact location of an accident. On the subject of the environment, it is not necessarily obvious that decentralization of political power would do anything at all to help solve environmental problems. Some communities would undoubtedly push for higher environmental standards, while others might abandon any standards at all. In the anti-civilization argument, any shift that would offer hope for an environmental recovery would happen only when efficiency is either no longer possible or no longer our highest goal. The goals of constant economic growth paired with steady population growth, which inevitably mean ever-increasing consumption, must be reversed. If the anti-civilization argument is correct, the current state is

incapable of doing this, as such a reversal would betray its reason for existing.

If the current civilization were to collapse with the state, it is likely that any survivors would need to start again at the level of smaller communities. But this is not an outcome that anyone should hope for. What role, if any, can local communities play in pushing back against the current practices of the state and civilization that degrade the environment and risk our lives? Can anarchism say anything about this? It occurs to me that what Kropotkin's vision of vernacular civilization predicts has emerged in a minor way in the "hip" neighborhoods of New York and other major cities. There people increasingly place a premium on slow, well-made food and drinks, handmade furniture, reclaimed objects, walkable neighborhoods and bikepaths. Of course, the idea that these trends will lead directly to the remaking of civilization is ridiculous. The ability to pay for a "bespoke" anything is only an option for the wealthy, as are all the "locally grown" and "organic" vegetables in the high-end supermarkets that seem to only exist in those neighborhoods. Those who live elsewhere shop at ordinary supermarkets (if they have access to them), eat conventionally grown (pesticide laden) vegetables, and drive to the "nice" areas to enjoy walking around. In the poorer neighborhoods, little thought is given to promoting pedestrian traffic or inviting public spaces. Instead these places become the thoroughfares for those headed to the nicer neighborhoods.

Increasingly, the poor neighborhood becomes the site of the highway off ramp, the industrial park, and the big box retailer, so that the posh neighborhood can have peasant bread and handicrafts without sacrificing the conveniences of modernity. Still, in spite of all this, the backward glance of the most privileged in our society underlines Kropotkin's

argument. As Marx points out, we live at a time when humanity has for the first time “too much civilization,”⁴⁴ but perhaps not enough of the right kind. By many accounts this is the triumph of the state and modern civilization. But it is only a quantitative triumph. The poor are provided with a surplus of calories and a dearth of nutrition. Almost anyone can buy furniture from Walmart, Ikea, or Amazon, but most of it is low quality and may not survive a move to a new location, and today's poor need to move often.

In practical terms, what can shift this picture working from the community level, assuming that the state and civilization don't collapse or change on their own? One step would be to insist that we all get more of what the “best” neighborhoods get. More pedestrian spaces, more dedicated bike lanes/paths, fewer cars, and less pavement. But this cannot be done as a series of individual initiatives, lest it become more of what we have, sporadic gentrification. If we are forced to reconcile accounts between the neighborhoods that have fewer cars and more pedestrians, and the pedestrian-hostile areas dominated by industrial buildings and off ramps, then something will have to give. At the very least we will gain a fresh perspective on the scale of the problem.

44 Marx, Engels, and Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*.