

Practical Anarchism

“A joyful rethinking of anarchism. Branson draws on a wealth of cutting-edge theory and the messiness of activism to illuminate new ways to transform society. The result is a practical guide to everyday revolutions. A real treasure.”

—Alex Prichard, author of *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*

“A clever, inspiring and accessible book! Branson’s brilliant method of weaving together our collective and individual lives alongside our most complex relationships with the many (eco) systems that we are part of is truly refreshing and ground-breaking. I feel that I and many other radicals have walked the edges of so many of these conversations that Branson has skillfully and necessarily busted open. I sure wish I had read this book years ago, but other than that, I will share it with everyone I know! And especially with anyone who has ever told me my ideas were impractical and pie-in-the-sky naivety.”

—carla joy bergman, editor of *Trust Kids!* and co-author of *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*

“Scott Branson denaturalizes property and hierarchy in every dimension of human life. Steeped in historical and archival knowledge of Black and queer proletarian feminisms and decolonial struggles against the state, *Practical Anarchism* is a powerful guide to the collective manufacture of utopia now.”

—Sophie Lewis, author of *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*

“Scott Branson confidently weaves political theory into everyday practice to expose the affinities between anarchism and contemporary anti-oppression politics and closes the gap between imagined futures and their creation. *Practical Anarchism* presents clear, astute critiques of work, school, and the destruction of community in capitalism, and serves as a handbook for liberation, both gently optimistic and intensely motivating.”

—Ruth Kinna, author of *The Government of No One: The Theory and Practice of Anarchism*

“Anarchism’s record as a political movement might be shaky. We have seen no large-scale, long-term anarchist society. Yet, anarchism’s record as an ethical guideline stands tall. Time and time again, anarchists have been involved in improving social relationships, empowering dispossessed and marginalized communities, and supporting struggles on the right side of history. In this highly readable and passionate book, Scott Branson sheds a light on many examples of everyday anarchist engagement and its rich contribution to making the world a better place.”

—Gabriel Kuhn, author of *Soccer vs. the State: Tackling Football and Radical Politics*

“*Practical Anarchism* hands us an anarchist kaleidoscope, inviting us to shake up this world and see the endless array of beautiful possibilities that are already present in the here and now. It offers this delightful gift not so that we may view an infinity of ever-shifting promise as mere spectators but rather as a reminder that we ourselves are continually engaged in creating collective care and freedom. It’s what I’d call ‘everyday anarchism’—the making and doing, routinely, of lives worth living for everyone. This book—tender, dreamy, actionable—inspires us to pick up all the sparkly, even if sometimes jagged, edges of daily life that too often go unnoticed and toss them, time and again, into utopian play.”

—Cindy Barukh Milstein, author of *Try Anarchism for Life: The Beauty of Our Circle*

“Deftly and joyfully shows us that lives lived with compassion and collective autonomy in the engagements we call anarchy have practical applications in our everyday living individually and collectively.”

—scott crow, insurgent, author of *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy and the Common Ground Collective*

“Scott Branson offers a unique and much-needed intervention in traditional anarchist thought to argue that anarchism—whether it’s identified as such or not—is a seed in most of our liberation practices and ideas. Their perspective comes from radical organizing experience, rigorous study of critical race and queer theory, as well as their commitment to their relationships and communities. Weaving practical advice alongside women of color, queer activists, abolitionists, and more, Branson offers us a beautiful reminder that we do anarchism everyday—through care, through imagining, through loving—against and in spite of the state. In a moment where it is easy to feel hopeless, *Practical Anarchism* is a fresh and unique take on how creating new worlds free of hierarchy and domination is a practice we’re already doing. And Branson offers us the tools to help it grow. This brilliant book is an antidote to giving up.”

—Raechel Anne Jolie, author of *Rust Belt Femme*

Practical Anarchism

A Guide for Daily Life

Scott Branson

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Introduction

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships.

Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex:
Women Redefining Difference"

How to Survive the Future

The main argument of this book is that anarchism is a name for something most of us already do. The name itself matters less than the doing. In writing this book, my objective is to reach out to those of you who haven't already developed tactics of survival and interdependence, or who haven't yet recognized the rebellion that you already live every day. In a simple way, my argument for anarchism is a process of denaturalizing all the aspects that structure our lives in ways that seem unquestionable, and reframing ways of relating to the people in our lives and the world that surrounds us from the point of view of care and freedom. While anarchism as a political ideological term has a recent and European origin, the ways of living that anarchism describes have long been practiced in various places, to varying degrees, throughout history and beyond. Those histories get buried in attempts to naturalize a view of the "human" that needs hierarchy, order, control, domination, and security. The truth that many anarchist writers have already tried to show over the years is that when it comes down to it, people tend to organize themselves quite well without domination and hierarchy. It takes a certain amount of (constant, everyday) violence to maintain the power structures of the state, the market, and gendered, racialized, and sexual differences, which make us feel dependent on answers coming from above.

The feeling that we need this kind of reorganizing of our lives is pretty dire, as the effects of the climate crisis get worse every year. Optimistic targets of cutting down emissions endorsed by state institutions and corporations seem less and less likely to be achieved, or worse, are proven to be insufficient to halt a world structure that is already collapsing. As the author of the anarchist text *Desert* claims, we cannot anticipate a worldwide revolution that will overthrow state and capital and therefore save us from climate catastrophe. But there is still space within this crumbling edifice of Western civilization to reassert other ways of life; ways that would allow us a different kind of freedom than that promised by consumer choice, electoral politics, and (unreachable) wealth accumulation.

One of my repeated ideas in this book is that anarchism proposes ways to break up with forms that don't work, that cause harm, that have failed. On the flipside of this, the state and the market try to position themselves as eternal, as the culmination of human history, as the solution to all the "problems" of inhabiting earth over thousands of years. This answer gets naturalized for us in the way that the state intercedes in all of our relationships, whether through recording our demographic data, centralizing access to services, or policing and surveilling us. We defer to an authority to solve our problems, and that feels normal. Anarchism instead looks for more direct ways to solve problems, to work in the places where conflicts and problems arise, rather than outsourcing our solutions to authoritarian structures that are as likely to cause further harm as provide any meager aid. We might find that it is actually more time-consuming, and less successful, if we don't directly confront the conflicts in our lives, but call on authority to intervene. But overall, engaging in conflict with the people we love, with whom we share space or collaborate on projects of any kind—this is a form of care that we need to prioritize. An anarchist approach to daily life starts in this form of care, taking care of all the life around us, whether "human" or "more than human" (animals, plants, ecosystems in general). And an essential part of care is acknowledging the limits of our capacity and facing up to the difficult moments of living together.

INTRODUCTION

This book proposes a way to infuse your daily life with anarchism by asking you to disidentify with the power structures that determine your life, which so often are internalized unconsciously and manifest in even the most mundane aspects of our living. Ongoing work is needed to unplug ourselves from the dominant world order, to unlearn oppressive masculinity, to betray and destroy white supremacy, and to remove ourselves from the logic of the state and the market that determines our interactions with each other through individual gain, competition, and the idea of protecting ourselves from one another. This book intends to guide us on this project, as the project of anarchism, to undo the hierarchies and stop our own reproduction of their logics in our daily lives.

Historically, anarchism is a revolutionary political ideology developed in the nineteenth century, in the contexts of debates around socialism, communism, and the labor movement, to aim for a stateless society, ordered around mutual aid and individual autonomy. Anarchism counters all forms of hierarchy, so we can extend its critique of the state and capitalism to other ways that power and oppression are imposed: by the means of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, childhood, and so on. Often we hear the proposition of anarchism as a utopian ideal set forever in the future: after the revolution, perhaps we will be able to achieve a society without rulers, where people can determine their own lives individually and collectively. However, just as prison and police abolitionists point out that abolition isn't an end goal but a daily endeavor of creating the world we want, anarchism too uses the idea of "prefiguration," which means living anarchism today, creating that better world even in the face of state oppression, racial capitalist exploitation, imperial wars, environmental collapse, cisheteropatriarchy, and the other hierarchical principles that determine our lives. It's not a wish for collapse or a passive or messianic awaiting of the revolution. Instead, this anarchism acts now to build relationships of care.

Of course, the anarchist will also look for direct confrontation with the systems of power that hoard resources and impose hierarchy. This is the more familiar anarchist, masked and dressed in black, breaking corporate windows (an echo of the image of the anarchist a century ago, mustachioed and holding a bomb). But perhaps the embodied lesson

we can take from direct-action-oriented anarchism, which has played an extensive role in the current manifestation of uprisings that swell street protest movements, is the building of relationships during a heightened moment of struggle. Just as in the face of climate disasters, people come together to aid each other's survival; when facing a police line among anarchists, you can feel what it is like to have someone get your back.

But what do we do when we aren't in the streets in direct confrontation? This book suggests we might find a similar mode of relationship that arises spontaneously in the face of crisis by rethinking how we relate to power structures, rooting out the logics of hierarchy that predetermine our judgments, and reorienting our connections with people through support for mutual responsibility and individual autonomy. I will enter into anarchism from this point to argue that we are not trying to "achieve" anarchism, for it's an endless process, one we might just as well call "living." I want to draw our attention to all the ways that we haven't been completely conquered, disciplined, and ordered into a way of life that naturalizes hierarchy, violence, competition, and mass death.

In this book, I bring a feminist and queer perspective to anarchism, particularly building from the work of Black feminism, and Indigenous and decolonial feminisms, to suggest that the chance of anarchism already exists in so many ways that we may not be aware of, and when we start to shift the kaleidoscope in this manner, we can maximize our anarchist ways of relating and living together. Even more, I think that by relating to our lives through daily anarchism, a comprehensive disidentification with the ways—particularly in a Euro-American context—that we have been trained to behave, we can start to bring together the moments of joy and freedom and refuse to place ourselves in our own subjection. Joy and freedom, like anarchism, I contend, are momentary experiences. We can't access a perfect life once and for all, and we can never be assured that we have arrived: as Ursula K. Le Guin writes about anarchism in her novel, *The Dispossessed*, when we "demand security, a guarantee," of that world, if it is "granted, [it] would become a prison." In this way, anarchism has to be a continual practice, not a static ideology, not a map towards revolution, not a blueprint of a post-revolutionary society. Anarchism only occurs in practice, as we

continually interrogate and reflect on the ways that power inheres in centers and corners, and we diffuse that power towards collective care and self-determination.

In revolutionary thinking, there is often an emphasis placed on the more glamorous (read masculinist) aspects of struggle, from direct action to guerrilla warfare, leaving out both the work done to make that struggle possible and the life that it supposedly aims to enable. This is where the feminist lens is essential: we always have to acknowledge that any direct conflict with the state, with the boss, with the masters, and with fascists, is made possible by the baseline of care we need to live. Here, I take my cue from the seventies feminist manifesto by Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework*, which argues that demanding wages for the labor expected for free from women under the guise of love, marriage, and motherhood is the first step towards refusing the role. It's a transformative project: "We want to call work what is work so that eventually we may discover what is love and create what will be our sexuality which we have never known." This line will become a refrain for the book, as I want to argue that if we find anarchism in our daily life, we may just be able to discover what living is.

Each chapter of this book will take as its focus an aspect of daily life, from relationships and activities, like family and work, to the seemingly rigid contours of our lives, like time and space. In this book, I suggest that practical anarchism, a practice of daily life, entails a process of disidentification with inherited and ingrained cultural logics that naturalize the lives we are living under state and capital, regimes of racial oppression and genocide, compulsory labor and nuclear families, and so on. A simple reduction of all these logics might come down to the fact that many of our cultural positions allow us to think that some people are better than others and that some people don't deserve to live (or they don't deserve food, shelter, and care). This hierarchical distinction among people gets naturalized and threaded through the very infrastructure of the modern nation state, through the racialization of particular groups, through the gender distinctions that keep all women in subjugation and maintain trans people as deviant, through the borders and citizenship status that manage the flow of labor and capital,

through the ownership of property and the idea that we should owe a landlord or the bank for our homes while some people don't deserve homes, through the idea that children aren't full human beings yet and are under complete dominance of their adult caretakers and basically any adult who might step into that role. The result is that dominance and control are everyday aspects of the world we inhabit, such that they pass most often without notice.

Disidentification means looking at the ideas we take for granted—what Marxists might call ideology; the ways that we are positioned within our language, culture, and political and economic framework to perform specific roles—and asking whom these ideas serve. Can we rethink these ideas from the angle of sharing power and resources, promoting collective freedom, operating through care? In each chapter, I focus on the ways specific activities and relationships are naturalized in our lives and suggest ways that we can unearth the power structures so that we can stop living our lives according to pathways that lead both to our own subjugation and our own attempts to hold power over others. In a sense, the process entails uprooting our own sense of our selves—our identities—since we form ourselves within the framework of the systems of power that are taught and embodied in our families, as well as in our education. However, I show that in many ways the process of disidentification puts us in touch with ways of relating to each other and the world that had to be intentionally destroyed by our indoctrination into these cultures of power. In other words, we typically want to help each other out, we get a feeling of joy of connection, we have curiosity about the world, its details, and its differences; we have to be trained to look out only for ourselves even to the extent of causing harm to others. In the end, we don't even know what we could be, alone and together.

The tactic of disidentification, as José Esteban Muñoz describes it in *Disidentifications*, can be traced to Black and women of color feminisms as well as queer modes survival; in other words, it develops from a minoritized position that has to negotiate with the structures of power that doom that position to destruction. Rather than choosing between assimilating (playing along) or simply forming an oppositional iden-

tity, disidentification works as a way outside this false choice, outside of the realm of purity of opposition, to try to survive and thrive beyond the structure we currently inhabit, without buying into the systems that want to kill us. In altering our relationships to ourselves, each other, and the world, we can perhaps reproduce a different set of relations than the dominant order: another kind of world.

Disidentification, therefore, isn't simply a negative program, but entails a reorientation towards the coordinates of our lives. In each chapter, I use a mode of disidentification to rethink the things we take for granted in our life, and in the process I open up space to reframe these ways of living from an anarchist perspective, that is, a perspective that aims for collective liberation, mutual aid, and self-determination. We can't wait for the perfect moment to start living; we can't expect a pure revolutionary change in which we leave the old world behind for good. We have to work with what is in front of us; we have to prepare ourselves to live lives that promote our freedom and everyone else's too. We must refuse their terms, but we can use the resources at hand to re-envision what life could really be.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the ideas associated with anarchism in order to present a practical understanding of anarchism as a mode of disidentification. When we refuse to cooperate with the hierarchies and binaries that discipline us into our world, we can take a different look at our daily lives and ask ourselves what life really is. Anarchism in the daily mode is rooting out where we let power dictate our relationships and actions; it opens up time and space for us to live otherwise.

Chapter 2 looks at our relationships, from friendship to love to family, proposing that we emphasize our ability to break up, to end things, to set boundaries. In much liberatory discourse, there is always an emphasis on community, but perhaps this idea of community ends up overemphasizing a kind of connection that often feels unattainable. If we start by saying no, we can learn about saying yes, and thereby form the relationships and webs of care that can actually sustain us.

Chapter 3 asks us to disidentify from the moralism of work, to reject competition and thinking our identity is bound with our jobs. Anarchism is anti-work, as a relationship of exploitation under capitalism. One refrain throughout the book is to rethink our ideas of work as labor, in order to reorient towards forms of relating as care. Therefore, we can look at our jobs as places where we can form other relationships and take whatever access we have to resources and share. We aim for a world without work, but what do you do now? If not unionize or collectivize (which are laudable), find ways to collaborate, support, and steal!

Chapter 4 frames our anarchist disidentification with the norms and discipline forced on us through school and education. Rather than look at institutional education as a good in itself, we think of anarchism as a mode of studying the world from a liberatory perspective, an act that helps us refuse to reproduce this system and start making other worlds. We can liberate study from any specific place and see it as a curious relation to our surroundings, done in collectivity with all forms of life.

Chapter 5 takes our orientation towards money as an enforced means of survival and asks us to reject the moralism of earning, saving, and spending. Our relation to the scarcity of money helps reproduce the exploitative conditions of capitalism, which keeps us saving for a someday that will never come. Our anarchism reframes money through spending, waste, luxury, theft, and sharing. Yes, we have to buy things in our current situation—our participation or non-participation in the economy isn't the key point of revolution. Instead, whatever you have, spread it around, think of your spending from the perspective of looting.

Chapter 6 helps us see our daily anarchism as a creative project, not only in our making and enjoying art but in the way we live our daily lives. Anarchism is expressive and visionary. It helps us analyze the images that inundate our lives and question forms of representation that are given to us as modes of liberation. Anarchist art helps inspire us to live out other worlds that don't reproduce our daily misery.

Chapter 7 looks at the spaces where we live, the scale of anarchism, and the ideas of property. We often hear that anarchism won't work because it's not centralized and can't handle the scale of the problems that face the world destroyed by the state and capitalism. But this is a

logic of top-down organizing. How do we fend for ourselves? In our reorientation to the dominant modes of living, we see anarchism as cropping up in the interstices: overlapping worlds of care and relation on a small scale within the structures that try to rule our lives. Not every space is under total control, so how can we see ourselves as caring for the land, simultaneously playing guest and host to others.

Chapter 8 proposes our anarchism as fleeting, momentary, and interruptive. We already live anarchy in moments throughout our day. Finding the places of freedom helps us realize how our daily lives and relationships form the world. Anarchism is non-progressive and non-triumphant. We don't expect the revolution, and our failures actually spell our commitment to playing and experimenting everyday anew. From this perspective, we can reorient our anarchism towards the world through loosely linked, momentary experiences of freedom—of life—that speak to the ongoing possibility of living anarchism now.

In the Coda, I try to describe the world outside the state as we currently live it, bringing together some of the key references I've drawn along the way. Practical anarchism lets us see that every day we live moments of freedom that can't be captured, can't be located. This is the life we've never let ourselves know; this is the daily life that springs up to show us the way.

For ease of using this book, at the end of each chapter I have included a two-question FAQs section to try to address the fundamental issues of the subject matter in a more concise way.

* * *

As a final note, I want to acknowledge my own position in writing this. I am writing embedded in my own organizing and community in the southeast of the so-called United States. In clear ways, I am limited by my own perspective, and I take responsibility for anything I left out. I am Jewish and a queer/trans femme. My life has been marked in particular ways by whiteness and patriarchal masculinity. The dominant framework I address is the power structure inherited from European colonialism and slavery, which to a certain extent has been exported

around the world but hasn't been imposed evenly, and hasn't fully destroyed the cultural lifeways of Indigenous groups all around the world. But even in the difference between the US and European contexts, I am closer and more informed about the United States. I regularly refer to the dominant ideologies of colonial power and anti-Blackness, which play out differently in different states, but which arguably form the knowledge and structure of modernity. I do not claim expertise or authority, and what I've cobbled together here comes from experiences of collaboration, of studying alongside other people. My work here is fundamentally indebted to the writing of previous thinkers, and I have particularly drawn from the histories of Black feminist, Indigenous, and women of color thought. To keep this book accessible, I have avoided extensive footnotes and scholarly citations, but I name these thinkers and their ideas along the way. Additionally, I have included a short Further Reading section that offers some of the books and writers that have been important to me. Each chapter deals with ideas and topics that could easily make up a book or library on their own. Here, I am distilling a way of thinking about anarchism into an accessible approach to reshaping the contours of our lives. I hope to contribute practical thoughts on how we already express anarchism in our daily lives as a way to move people towards refusing the wages of the good life enshrined in our continual barrage of representations of how we ought to be. Together we can feel our lives for what they are, below the surveilling eyes of the state, of capitalism, of the image, in an embodied movement towards collective liberation.