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Intellectual Diary of an Iconoclast

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Abstract

Trying to address a series of large questions—e.g., when peasants rebel, clandestine forms of resistance, state "imagination," and the origin of the very first agrarian states—led me to abandon much of the standard political science "tool kit." This is an account of that intellectual journey.

INTRODUCTION

I've wandered away from political science, though I could argue that political science has wandered away from me. I am honored even to be seen as a specialist, and probably as much to be embraced by anthropology and history.

I don't want this to be a reminiscence, let alone a defense of my previous work. I'll make one exception, because I do believe it shaped my career at the University of Wisconsin, where I had my first job. It was the beginning of the height of the Vietnam War. I gave many lectures against the Vietnam War. I had a huge class with Edward Friedman on peasant revolution and revolt. There were 600 students in the class, and 60 of them judged that Friedman and I were insufficiently progressive. So they went out after every class and wrote a critique of the day's lecture, which they handed out to all the other students at the next lecture. At the end of this experience, I decided to be a student of the peasantry.

It spurred a massive intellectual reorientation. I had to read all the literature on European peasant history and movements, for example, Marc Bloch and A.V. Chayanov. I knew I had to live in a peasant village. I knew it was important for me, if I was going to make a career out of studying peasants, to know at least one peasant setting well. It was not easy, as it involved learning the local dialect. The result of that field study appeared as a book entitled *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985), which was my first foray outside of political science. Many people told me that going to a small village with 70 families was a career-ending move. It was a topic, a subject, rather than a discipline, and they thought no one would be interested in a small village. Well, the book turned out to do fairly well, and I have of course been pleased that I chose a subject, if you like, that was a group of people as a population, rather than a hypothesis or a mode of analysis.

A WIDENED TEMPORAL LENS

My last two books are about the rise of agrarian states in Mesopotamia and how the agricultural complex was originally established (Scott 2017, 2020). In my work underway now, I am writing about rivers in general and the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar (Burma) in particular. This pivot has caused me to radically change my temporal lens, and the units of time with which I work. Political scientists have a whole series of temporal metrics, including an election cycle and one human life span. One of the themes of the rivers book is to emphasize that everything moves. Think of tectonic plates, galactic time, earthquakes—if you wait long enough, everything is moving. We are moving closer to the Eurasian continent by an inch or so every hundred years.

The other lens that has changed my perspective is the special lens that sees well beyond the confining and more or less arbitrary borders of the nation state. Thus, inspired by the work of Willem van Schendel (2001), I have begun to think of the uplands of Southeast Asia as a distinctive area that crosses the boundaries of seven or eight states: "Zomia." Zomia is an ecological zone as much as anything, and has proven to be the refuge, for millennia, of people who were running away from states to evade their taxes, wars, and epidemics. The same goes for wetlands and swamps. For example, the Great Dismal Swamp on the border of Virginia and North Carolina held something like 6,000 runaway slaves at the outset of the Civil War, who had come there in spurts for many decades. For another example, the so-called Orang Laut, sometimes called Sea Gypsies, of Southeast Asia live largely aboard their boats and move between islands in their search for commercial products gathered from the sea. The main point is that there are many different constructions of space that are more meaningful and powerful than the mere division between nation states. Some of these constructions are essentially environmental: for example, a watershed, a highland area, a delta, or a swamp. They are more likely as geographical distinctions to exercise a good deal of power over the livelihoods and subsistence of the people who live in these settings.

The same goes for zones that are, for example, riverine zones that extend up and down a water course, and for that matter for flat plains that are in themselves quite distinctive in terms of subsistence possibilities, transport, and livelihoods. I quite understand that the boundaries of nation states demarcate political units of great power, and are there for major actors in international politics; but to privilege these often quite artificial lines drawn between contesting colonial powers is not helpful in understanding the subsistence and needs of people who may live across international boundaries, but who share an environmental setting in common with their neighbors.

BELOW-THE-RADAR RESISTANCE

On the basis of my year and a half in a Malay village, I discovered that resistance was ubiquitous, but it almost always took the forms that were least dangerous and were designed to evade any dangerous retaliation from the authorities.

Those of us who work in quasi-democratic settings understand that it is possible to organize social movements that are publicly visible and that may result in protest, and, for that reason, Charles Tilly (2016, p. 298) laid out the criteria that were necessary to identify a political movement as a social movement. It had to reach a certain level of membership. It had to have a name, it had office holders, and it had usually a program of legislation that the social movement was pressing for.

Most of the world, however, does not live under such conditions, and historically these conditions have been quite rare. Therefore, the form that resistance tends to take, which maximizes the safety of the resistors, is designed not to attract dangerous retaliation. However, it is possible for such movements to actually achieve the results that are associated with the more open social movements. Let me give an example in Malaysia. There was widespread resistance to the Islamic tithe, called the *zakat*, when it was revised so that the tax payments would go to the state capital and not be distributed, as before, within the village on a voluntary basis. There was opposition but there was no open protest. There were no marches; there were no petitions to the government. The opposition to the tithe took the form of surreptitiously undermining it by emptying it of substance. For example, rice handed over to local officials was almost always the worst rice, and the bags of rice were contaminated with stones in order to increase their apparent weight. In addition, everyone was expected to declare the acreage that they farmed in order to determine how much tithe they were responsible for. Almost all farmers minimized their actual acreage, in order to diminish the tithe that was owed. The local authorities, however, understood that the tithe was deeply unpopular, and the local officials who wanted to keep their reputation avoided cracking down on this underestimating of land farmed. The result was to undo the Islamic tithe system quietly, while always evading the risk of government retaliation. It was done with minimal risk to the opponents of the tithe, without any formal social organization, without any open protest, and without public clashes with authorities. This form of resistance, I would add, is the usual resistance one encounters in nondemocratic settings. But it is often seen as trivial by social scientists, who privilege open social movements in democratic settings.

Sometimes this resistance takes open, but symbolic, forms. They are understood as resistance although they may be wrapped in day-to-day activities that are quite within the law. Let me give an example. When the Solidarity Movement was strong at the end of martial law in Poland, there were forms of symbolic protest that drove the government crazy. The government news broadcast took place at 6:00 PM and people decided by the hundreds of thousands to leave their houses. The moment the news broadcast began, they took a walk in the street for a half hour, until the news broadcast was over, with their hats on backwards. There was no law against taking a walk, and there was, of course, no law about wearing your hat backwards. You could understand, however, that this was a huge morale booster for much of the Polish opposition to martial law.

The government responded by forcing a curfew at exactly 6:00 that would require people to be in their houses during the news broadcast. Within a few days, the Polish opposition had discovered a workaround. Since they could no longer be in the street during the news broadcast, what they did was to take their television set, put it on the windowsill, and blare out the news broadcast—which they considered to be largely lies—to the security forces, who were the only people in the street. This, as you can imagine, was also a huge morale booster and a symbolic victory for the opposition to martial law, even though it did not change the power dynamic in the short run.

My argument is that such forms of below-the-radar resistance are the raw material for later protest, and they create solidarity among those who are practicing this resistance. They are the fallback position for anyone but the very bravest—for all who are in fear of losing their freedom, or even their lives, if they were to protest openly. If there is anything to be said for my argument, it is that we should have a wider lens that encompasses activities of resistance and subversion that are cultural, playful, and quasi-hidden, and that also involve politics in its most important sense. In all those settings where public activity and open protest are dangerous, if not lethal, it becomes important to wrap one's differences in forms that are disguised enough that the authorities can't prosecute someone, but most of those who observe the activity understand that it has subversive content. It is the expression of agency for subjects who have very little in the way of legal protection.

I would have not learned a bit of this unless I had spent hours and hours talking with villagers, rich and poor, political friends and political enemies, and listened to their descriptions of what they were doing, and the effects they hoped it would have. I want to emphasize the methodology of ethnography in this respect. If you want to know why people do what they do—and that, after all, is much of what political science is in pursuit of—then it makes sense to ask them what they think they are doing. What they say may not be totally truthful, and/or misperceived. That is to say, their self-explanations of what they are up to deserve careful scrutiny and analysis. On the other hand, the pretension and arrogance of assuming that we do not even have to ask them what they think they are up to amount to doing social science behind people's backs. That is inadmissible. Any account of why people do what they do that does not take into consideration what they believe they are doing doesn't even deserve to be called social science.

A CONVENTIONAL BEGINNING

I worry that I have come across as describing myself as clairvoyant, and perhaps even arrogant. That is far from my intention. I was trained in the 1960s at Yale when everything was saturated with positivism, and I fell prey to the ideology of my professors. My luck, I suppose, is that I had spent a year doing fieldwork in Malaysia among bureaucrats and actually interviewing people, in line with what my mentor, Yale's Robert Lane, had done with American citizens in his famous book on political ideology (Lane 1962). In orthodox fashion, I continued to be a good little political scientist, working on corruption and machine politics. Two articles along these lines were published in the APSR (*American Political Science Review*) in the early1970s. That is to say, my trajectory until the early 1970s was that of a standard political scientist, hoping to achieve tenure. I was extremely lucky that this was the beginning of a romance with the Global South, and the fact that I had spent a year in Malaysia worked in my favor in obtaining a job. I would otherwise probably not have gotten a job at the University of Wisconsin. With my first book, drawn from my thesis, and a short book on corruption in general, I earned tenure at Wisconsin, and could relax, in terms of my intellectual choices. It was at that moment that the Vietnam War intervened. I became deeply involved in work against the war, and decided, as I said above, to devote myself to a career that would study the largest and most important class in world history: the peasantry.

It was the choice of living in a rice farming village in Malaysia for a year and a half that changed me utterly. I began with the idea that I would study class conflict that had to do with the

mechanization of the rice harvest along with the entry of machine-combines, owned by outsiders. My premise was that this would be a standard Marxist study of class conflict. I found nothing of the kind. The opposition to the combine harvesters was ferocious but all under the radar, and it is in that sense that I discovered, as it were, or uncovered the process of everyday forms of peasant resistance. It sure was a heads-up for someone accustomed to studying open political processes in the United States and other democracies. My ship was headed to unfamiliar ports that are not on the standard tour of political science work.

This required acquaintance with a new literature and a greater geographical breadth of interest in agriculture and peasant life than I had earlier bargained on. Happily, a small fragment of political scientists happened to think that what I was doing was not without value, and they were encouraging. I might have wandered away on my own, but it is always encouraging to have colleagues who see the value in the detour one has taken. Many, of course, thought that I had abandoned the discipline altogether, but I fail to see how the book *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998) is not directly centered on state projects and the nation state in particular.

TWO LEAPS

The next two books were leaps into the abyss. The first, titled *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2010), is an explanation of how it was that highland people in upland Southeast Asia had for a long period managed to escape incorporation into nation states and subjugation. I made a point of reading a lot of archive material and anthropology and the accounts of historical movements. History is complicated, but it makes it clear that the people in the hills were not, as valley residents usually assume, a population that had not discovered white rice cultivation, Buddhism, and civilization. They were instead a population that had over centuries run away from the state, taxes, conscription, forced labor, and disease. The point is that they are not a precivilization group, but they are a post-civilization group, who have rejected many of the aspects of what state-administered lowlanders consider civilized existence. Here I was greatly inspired by the path-breaking work of Pierre Clastres (1987) and his book *Society Against the State*, which argues that many of the so-called Stone Age people in Latin America are not survivors of an uncivilized population but rather people who left civilization, because hunting and gathering and other forms of agriculture and subsistence were less onerous. They associated Spanish settlement with forced labor and with disease. This utterly changed the narrative of civilization's strata, depending on how integrated, or not, you were in taxpaying lowland civilization. Such societies have maintained a degree of independence by virtue of living in difficult terrain; planting crops that cannot easily be seized by the state or by tax collectors, that is to say roots and tubers by and large; and, I argue, by fissioning when necessary into smaller and smaller groups that make them harder and harder for the state to incorporate.

The second leap into the abyss was almost an accident. I was asked to deliver the Tanner Lectures at Harvard, which, as you may know, pay well, and I had just finished the aforementioned book. I treasure the period after finishing a book as a period of free reading, when I am not focused on what will help or diminish my argument. The Tanner officials decided that it was now or never, and that I had to do something in the next 5 months. I scratched my head and finally came up with the idea that I might revise the lectures that I gave at the beginning of the agrarian seminar for 10 years, describing the domestication of plants and the establishment of the first towns, states, and cities. I had tried to keep them up-to-date, but I realized that many were not entirely, and I thought I could in 3 months revise those lectures to make them more accurate and illuminating for the students. So I now hurled myself at the archaeology and the classical history of the last 15 or 20 years.

To my consternation, most of what I had been teaching was actually wrong. I had to go back to the drawing board, and so my lectures were essentially a report of my ignorance, and what

I'd been teaching is now understood as error. There intervened a period of 3 to 4 years when I reformulated those lectures to make them more accurate and informative. I found out that the domestication of plants occurs definitively at least 4,000 years before we encounter any village living largely by agriculture. I was taught that the moment we domesticated plants we immediately and happily settled down into fixed fields. Nothing could be more wrong. Planting crops on fixed fields involves forms of labor that are onerous, and generally avoided when easier forms of subsistence are at hand. Another assumption of the literature was that the moment that we discovered domesticated plants, it offered us the possibility of settling in a single area and living in fixed settlements. The assumption was that this is exactly what we wanted to do. The evidence, however, suggests that every time we have by force pushed mobile peoples like pastoralists and hunters and gatherers into fixed settlements, we have found ourselves with a small war on our hands. That is, it does not follow that people naturally want to settle permanently in a single place. In any event, this period of reading allowed me to understand the so-called Neolithic revolution in ways that are revolutionary and different from what I had been taught as a schoolchild.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One further comment about the conduct of political science. As I finished my PhD thesis, I realized that the thesis had actually narrowed my intellectual lens to the point where I had become, if anything, a little stupider than when I began. Having realized that I was not sure of what I was analyzing, I decided to undertake some wider reading, which would broaden my horizons. I have come to the realization, as, I am sure, have many of my colleagues, that political scientists are not the only social scientists who are able to grapple with a particular subject. In my understanding of the peasants, I made an effort to study history, poetry, folk culture, and all other aspects of peasant culture. This was very important, and I extended it to novels and memoirs, and undertook a more comprehensive study of the peasantry than would have been possible within the confines of political science. Over time I discovered that these various sources, not confined to social science, were often studded with striking observations that would not have come to me on my own. I have evolved a way of understanding this process. If you read only material in the center of political science, you are likely to reproduce centrist political science in turn. Very little else is possible. So, before you begin a book or article, it makes sense to cast your net as widely as possible to see what insights are available from outside social sciences. You will, I think, be surprised at the insights that mere non–social scientists have managed to gather. The precious treasure of insights they offered was the raw material from which I drew. Thanks to casting a wide net, I found dozens and dozens of insights that came from folklore, novels, and other sources. One of my favorite gems is a Jamaican proverb: "Hit a straight lick with a crooked stick."

My conception of hidden, disguised, and openly declared transcripts is wholly derived from the efforts to understand a full culture of subordinate peoples.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the content of this article.

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