

Theme Issue

Unearthing Resistance – James C. Scott’s Legacy for Critical Archaeologies and Histories



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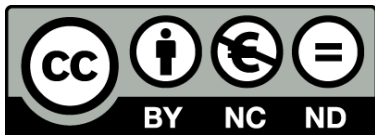
James C. Scott: A Tribute

FKA Editorial Collective

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James C. Scott: A Tribute

FKA Editorial Collective

James C. Scott, political scientist and anthropologist, passed away on 19 July 2024 at the age of 87. He was Sterling Professor of Political Science and Director of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University – and a farmer. His scholarship focused on agrarian societies, state power, and forms of political resistance. Scott conducted extensive fieldwork in southeast Asia. A prolific writer (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_C._Scott), Scott’s books inspired scholars across many fields – and many of us in the editorial collective of *Forum Kritische Archäologie* (FKA) as well. His work has influenced our perspectives on the mechanisms of state power and ways of resisting or avoiding it. His challenges to traditional narratives of state formation and state control and the alleged powerlessness of the marginalized have helped us as archaeologists to think about material traces of ‘everyday forms of resistance’, ‘hidden transcripts,’ and ‘weapons of the weak.’

Not only have we engaged individually with his work, we also have done so collectively. In June 2017, shortly before the publication of his book *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, FKA invited him to an afternoon discussion. Together with the nearly 30 participants, Jim enlightened and entertained us with his erudition, down-to-earth approach to intellectually challenging issues, his kindness, and his wit.

The plan to invite Jim was originally a bit of a shot in the dark. One of us had corresponded with him briefly by email. Our original idea was to invite him for a lecture, leaving open the precise topic but indicating that we were particularly interested in his notion of hidden transcripts and their implications for resistance. As we wrote in the initial invitation:

“[...] it has always bothered [us] that ancient empires are depicted as polities without any opposition. Your input in changing that would be important.”

Jim replied promptly to the email, expressing a willingness to come to Berlin to give a talk if he could combine it with one or more other engagements in Europe. He also mentioned his forthcoming book (*Against the Grain*) and suggested that he would like to orient his talk – which was ultimately entitled “Barbarians and States” – to some part of it. As our email exchange began to take shape, we asked whether he would be willing to follow up the talk the next day with a discussion with a group of interested persons, mostly archaeologists:

“What we propose is to get a group of people together who have read your Mesopotamia MS (if we may distribute it to them) and then have an open discussion, likely with questions from our side. [...] If you prefer having beer and visiting Kreuzberg [Berlin], that’s fine, too!”

With his usual generosity Jim wrote in reply: “The workshop/seminar you propose for the 14th is fine. As I see it, the schedule is not so crowded that I shall be unable to find time for a beer in Kreuzberg.” And then, once the dates had been confirmed: “Good, I’ve got it carved on my stone calendar.”

As the time got closer, the planning moved into a more concrete phase. Jim wrote:

“Incidentally, close friends also visiting Berlin will be joining me for dinner on the 11th. [...] many many years ago my wife and I were fond of a Kreuzberg restaurant that employed exclusively released convicts – the food was also very good!”

The seminar/discussion was planned for a nearly three-hour slot. The room was full, the discussion lively. In addition to speaking about various aspects of his forthcoming book as well as his previous work, Jim was not averse to addressing questions about his personal acts of resistance in the face of state repression and injustice.

We feel privileged to have gotten to know Jim personally and to have been enriched and inspired by his work. In a modest tribute to him, we have gathered here six brief contributions by scholars who for the most part work in archaeology and related ancient studies. They reflect on how Jim’s work has impacted their own scholarship as well as that of others in the field. Current political events demonstrate how topical and meaningful Scott’s work and the contributors’ comments are. Dismantling of the state is turning before our eyes into a dismantling of the protection of already impoverished and/or discriminated segments of society. It is making all too clear that there is a fundamental difference between an ideology of libertarianism and the kind of anarchism that Jim Scott advocated.

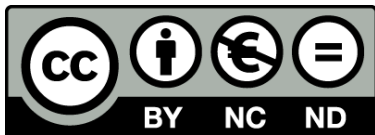
Feminist Archaeology and the Legacy of James Scott: Interventions in the Writing of Women’s History

Maryam Dezharkhooy

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Feminist Archaeology and the Legacy of James Scott: Interventions in the Writing of Women’s History

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Introduction

At the time of working on this paper (December 2024), I attended a session organized by Bidar Research Institution in Tehran, where a young feminist was presenting the results of her M.A. dissertation on the Iranian women’s movement, One Million Signatures Campaign, in the 2000s. When I questioned the application of theories developed to study the agency and political action of subaltern groups, particularly Asef Bayat’s work, one member of the audience responded that this is not relevant to feminism and women’s movement. Nobody provided a counter argument, but a young male student mentioned another work by Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam*, where he discusses the agency of ordinary women in the Iranian post-revolutionary society. He briefly discussed the relevance of Bayat’s work to the exploration of women as a subaltern group.

In *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Asef Bayat (2010) introduces the quiet encroachment of the ordinary. Drawing on James Scott’s everyday forms of resistance, Bayat discusses how subaltern groups such as the poor and women seek “life chances” through quiet encroachment in daily life in post-revolutionary Iran. He claims that “in many authoritarian Muslim states, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, where conservative Islamic laws are in place, women have become second-class citizens in many domains of public life. Consequently, a central question for women’s rights activists is how to achieve gender equality under such circumstances” (Bayat 2010: 96). Bayat answers this question in the framework of Scott’s theory: “Women resisted these policies, not much by deliberate organized campaigns, but largely through mundane daily practices in public domains, such as working, playing sports, studying, showing interest in art and music, or running for political offices” (Bayat 2010: 97). Bayat calls this “feminism of everyday life” (2010: 96).

This short narrative brings me to the point that I want to discuss in this paper: the application of theories of political action and the resistance of subordinate groups in feminist and gender archaeology. I briefly discuss the relevance of subaltern studies generally and James Scott’s “everyday forms of resistance,” then turn to the methodological and socio-political outcomes of this expansion for feminist and gender archaeology. Finally, I discuss two examples to demonstrate the significance of daily life as a site of conflict and resistance.

Different Standpoints and Different Actions of the Subaltern

Anthropologist James Scott dedicated most of his professional life to the investigation of marginalized communities such as peasants and rural communities in non-Western societies. Scott (1989: 33) criticizes the tendency to ignore everyday forms of resistance in favor of the emphasis on “open political action.” He discusses the less visible, everyday forms of resistance, particularly among lower classes and subordinate groups, such as socially, politically and economically underprivileged women. He calls these strategies “the ordinary means of class struggle [...]. When they are widely practiced by members of an entire class against elites or the state, they may have aggregate consequences all out of proportion to their banality when considered singly” (Scott 1989: 34). Effectively, “acts of resistance are so deeply integrated into social life that they become an ordinary part of people’s

existence” (Kazmi 2022: 61). Scott’s research reveals the significance of resistance strategies in daily life as a “prosaic but constant struggle” between the subordinate and the powerful (Scott 1985: 29; see also Bayat 2013; Chaudhary et al. 2017). A prominent aspect of everyday forms of resistance is their cumulative impact, which participates in massive socio-political transformations (Scott 1989: 42).

As I have remarked elsewhere, feminist scholarship also argues for the significance of daily life and “raising resistance from a gendered perspective” (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 23). Gayatri Spivak also considers women’s experience, representing female subaltern persons “as subject to even greater degrees of economic, cultural, and political marginalization” (Moore-Gilbert 2005: 454).

In seeking to make visible women’s political activities outside of conventional masculine institutions, feminist scholarship has revised scholarly understandings of what constitutes politics (Murphy 2010: 20–21) and has argued for an alternative understanding of power. Hartsock (1997: 607) has pointedly argued that “to be without the power of dominance is perceived as being very nearly without the power to act at all, or at least as being without the power to act effectively”. Defining power as “capacity”, or, as Hanna Pitkin suggests, replacing “power over” with “power to,” brings our attention to other aspects of power, especially the “powers of the allegedly powerless” (Pitkin 1985: 276; Mohaghegh Neyshabouri 2020: 43).

As the aforementioned arguments suggest, we need to apply theoretical frameworks that bear a capacity to demonstrate the power and agency of subaltern groups such as subordinated women. Indeed, we should start our investigation of power relations from the standpoint of women. Feminist standpoint theory has put forward striking methodological arguments in terms of women’s different lived experiences. According to this theory, knowledge is socially situated, and research should begin with the lives of the subordinate (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 24). Feminist standpoint theory seeks to uncover the hidden knowledge that women have acquired “from living life on the margins” (Brooks 2007: 77). The feminist historian Bettina Aptheker argues that a different kind of resistance has been “shaped by the dailiness of women’s lives” (1989: 173). She defines this concept as “the patterns women create and the meanings women invent each day and over time as a result of their labors and in the context of their subordinated status to men” (Aptheker 1989: 38). She argues that this kind of resistance comes from the responsibility of women in everyday life to sustain their children, families and communities. “It is a resistance that exists outside the parameters of those politics and outside the purview of any of the traditional definitions of progress and social change” (Aptheker 1989: 173). Interestingly, Aptheker’s words in terms of women’s resistance are very close to Scott’s ideas: this kind of political action “is not openly declared in the usually understood sense of ‘politics’” (Scott 1989: 33). Just as Scott considers the cumulative impact of everyday forms of resistance, Aptheker also believes that women’s resistance in daily life “has a profound impact on the fabric of social life because of its steady, cumulative effects” (Aptheker 1989: 173).

Connecting the links between standpoint feminism and the theory of everyday forms of resistance allows us to consider the dynamism of ordinary women’s life in community and society, particularly in marginalized communities. Accordingly, we can “see” the potentials of daily activities (such as household chores) and different strategies in daily life that women adopt to resist and survive. In *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Silvia Federici emphasizes the significance of daily life and “activities that reproduce our lives” as the starting point for women’s resistance and the organization of politics (Federici 2019: 142). As I have argued, “a multi-scalar focus on women’s daily life can draw attention to the overlooked aspects of resistance and new ways of looking at resistance” (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 25).

Archaeological Knowledge and the Study of Women as Subaltern

The study of women in archaeology was chiefly established in the 1970s by feminist scholars inspired by the contemporary women’s movements, which influenced social science and humanities. “Gender archaeology was born out of feminist reflections on the discipline” (Montón-Subías and Meyer 2018: 6). These theoretical and critical shifts in archaeology problematized the absence of women in archaeological interpretations.

Since then, feminist and gender archaeologists have tried to develop concepts and methodologies to explore the life of ordinary women. Subfields such as household archaeology have introduced the world(s) of women and particularly daily life to archaeological research. “Only *Gender Archaeology* (Gero – Conkey 1991), with its focus on the areas of women’s experience and its feminist concern for housework [...] has begun to regard the chores and tasks comprising maintenance activities as a field worthy of study” (Montón-Subías 2010: 25). The concept of maintenance activities, introduced by Spanish archaeologists, refers to “the basic tasks that regulate both the course of human life and social stability on a daily basis, and are therefore crucial for the reproduction, cohesion, and welfare of human groups. [...] indeed, they are all life-supporting activities connected with the welfare of every member of the social group” (Montón-Subías 2010: 24–26).

What women in daily life do is far more complex than physical care in the domestic space. The “dailiness of women” (Aptheker 1989: 7) is socio-politically charged, and daily tasks or maintenance activities may convey political implications. The strategies women apply in daily life are usually defensive in their objectives. Scott remarks that the purpose of “these defensive strategies from below” is usually to “avoid notice and detection” (Scott 1989: 34, 46). Maintenance activities can be observed, controlled or even be the subject of interventions by dominant groups. Montón-Subías (2018) discusses how the Spanish colonizers and missionaries changed the gender system and the daily life of women of the Chamorro community in Guam, with a focus on maintenance activities.

Such approaches offer considerable potentials as a departure point to deconstruct the duality of public and private. “The domestic sphere has been deemed irrelevant to the configuration of the dynamic social processes involving creativity and historical change – hence its exclusion from most social studies” (Montón-Subías 2010: 24). What Scott (1989: 33) calls “open political action” is usually connected to the public sphere and conceived as the action of male political elites “performed within narrowly defined political institutions” (Murphy 2010: 21).

Scott (2008: 34) believes that “the more typical forms of political conflict dominate the historiography of the peasantry and other subordinate groups”. He emphasizes the piecemeal encroachment of subordinate groups and its contrast with open political action. He states that “such techniques are relatively safe, they often promise vital material gains, and they require little or no *formal* coordination let alone formal organization” (Scott 1989: 35). Indeed, subaltern studies indicate that a conservative understanding of political action usually cannot explain the nature of the resistance of subordinate communities. Therefore, we need to deconstruct the conservative androcentric discourse on political action and resistance to comprehend the different nature of political action by women.

The exploration of women’s resistance and the political implications of their actions in daily life is still in its infancy in archaeology. The development of theoretical concepts such as Scott’s has provided archaeology with insights into the life of non-elite groups including ordinary and subordinate women. Indeed, the alliance between Scott’s theory and feminism on the significance of daily life as a site of resistance in women’s life have resulted not only in the production of micro-scale archaeological narratives about the ignored and less-investigated aspects of women’s life but also critical interventions in writing the histories of different societies and communities. These critical narratives usually present a more dynamic image of social life and avoid the reduction of socio-political changes to the decisions of a small group of political (male) elites.

Below, I briefly discuss two examples, one from my recent research on the 19th century women’s resistance in Iran and the other from Montón-Subías’s study on the colonized Chamorro community in Guam.

Daily Life as the Site of Conflict and Resistance

In the 19th century Iran was governed by the Qajar dynasty. It was a time of growing economic conflicts between Iranians and Europeans that resulted in a deep economic stagnation and the rise of resistance in Iran (Keddie 1972: 73). “By the mid-nineteenth century, the import of Western manufactured goods has accelerated the bankruptcy of the craftsmen in most branches of traditional industries” (Malek 1991: 75). In fact, one of the fundamental axes of Western dominance was through the prevalence of consumption among the (world’s) population (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 11).

While male politicians initiated various strategies to counter the economic problems through political institutions, “women approached the economic crisis through the concept of household management, *tadbir-e manzel/tartib-e zendegi*. They claimed the importance of home management and the promotion of women to the household managers” (Najmabadi 1998: 91). Drawing on Scott’s everyday forms of resistance, I have considered forms of resistance and strategies invented by women as a group outside the institutional political structure. In doing this, I adopted the term “maintenance activities” introduced by Spanish archaeologists (Montón-Subías 2010, 2018; Montón-Subías and Sánchez-Romero 2008) to avoid the duality of public and private and to transcend the limiting and biased nature of conservative terms, such as domestic activities.

Frugality and economy as science and less consumption turned into critical words in women’s literature and writings. It was proposed that a proper daily routine and less consumption could support *mam-e vatan*, the homeland, and the economy. Drawing on home management they insisted on women’s education and its critical role in sustainable household consumption (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 11).

I have argued that women actively reacted to a national economic crisis and organized activities against Western economic encroachment. These strategies included the establishment of organizations and campaigns and the encouragement of women to restructure the family economy, where they usually made the decisions (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 135). From women’s perspective, the country’s major problems and crises were relevant to troubles and mismanagement in families and in individual decision making. Women’s resistance was organized around two main issues: promoting domestic production and the boycott of Western manufactured goods. To achieve these goals, women adopted two main and interwoven strategies based on their concrete experiences in everyday life: the promotion of home management skills (the defensive strategy) and the launching of a series of organized activities, including the establishment of associations, cooperatives and educational institutions (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 137). In these ways, women developed a series of strategies based on their lived experiences and around the notion of politicized domesticity.

The relative absence of women in the historiography of 19th and early 20th Iran has not only impaired women and women’s research in contemporary Iranian society. It has also led to the removal of parts of political, social and economic history of the country which can be understood through the lens of daily life.

In a second example, Montón-Subías (2018) demonstrates how Spanish missionaries in the 17th century intervened in the daily life of the indigenous people in Guam (Marianas Islands) in the name of a “civilizing enterprise”. The oppression targeted two main aspects of Chamorro people: gender arrangements and maintenance activities. Montón-Subías observes that there were lesser differences in gender asymmetries between men and women in Guam prior to the incursions of the Spanish, and “men would have participated in some maintenance activities” such as children’s socialization (Montón-Subías 2018: 410). Significantly, in the Chamorro community “the gap between the social value attached to maintenance activities and other types of activities was usually non-existent, or at least very minor” (Montón-Subías 2018: 412). Participation in maintenance activities did not result in a lower social status and less prestige for women.

The Spanish colonizers intervened severely in different aspects of indigenous life to incorporate “Guam into the colonial network of the Spanish empire” (Montón-Subías 2018: 405). Forced conversions to Christianity and the Spanish colonial version of Christian values concentrated chiefly on “living spaces, children’s socialization, foodways, careways, dress and corporeal habits, kinship, healing practices and sexuality” (Montón-Subías 2018: 405).

“Jesuits used all the means at their disposal to destructure more equal relations between Chamorro men and women” (Montón-Subías 2018: 423). The missionaries introduced engendered schools for children and more specialized sexual division of labor to Chamorro people. Gradually, “colonization gendered maintenance activities female” (Montón-Subías 2018: 422). Chamorros’ ancient conception of woman underwent massive changes, and a new type of woman, the “demure Spanish lady”, emerged, who was associated with the new form of domestic space (*reducción*) and the nuclear family. Eventually, the colonial intervention in the Chamorro community reduced women’s participation in politics (Montón-Subías 2018). Montón-Subías’s discussion demonstrates the socio-political aspect of daily life, which can be turned into a site of conflict and resistance, and the subordination of women “through forced restructuration” (2018: 3) of daily life on the other hand.

Discussion: Women’s Resistance Through the Lens of Everyday Life

What is feminism, and what is not feminism? Evidently, questions such as these still concern feminists in terms of what can be called a feminist piece of research and/or act. Such questions also deeply influence the theoretical and methodological perspectives that we apply to consider women’s movements and resistance.

This paper has been inspired by my lived experiences as a subaltern and second-class citizen, which is the product of an intersection of my gender, class, political attitudes and many other factors. So, I approach feminism, or what I understand as feminism, from this standpoint. I think the definition of feminism as a separate, isolated framework that should avoid any connection to non-feminist research and perspectives is the reduction of feminism and the ignorance of the dynamism of women’s life. Doing so leads in turn to biased methodologies. It should be clarified that our concentration on feminism should not overlook the contributions that other theoretical approaches and “non-officially” feminist scholars such as Scott and Bayat have made to the studies of subaltern groups, including women.

The intellectual reach of Scott’s work has extended well beyond anthropology. Scholars of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken an interest in his theories on subaltern and non-institutional ways of resistance and political action. So why not feminist and gender archaeologies? Everyday forms of resistance could provide feminist and gender archaeologies with a powerful analytical tool to engage with the life of ordinary women (and men). Scott’s works deconstruct the focus of knowledge on elite groups and problematize the key role of these groups in socio-political transformations, which have been usually taken for granted as “self-evident” in conservative discourses, not only in anthropology but also in history and archaeology. The dominant conservative discourse usually considers political, economic and social institutions established by elite groups as the units of analysis and ignores the roles, strategies and resistance of subaltern groups.

Third-wave feminism with its consideration of pluralism, non-white women, and the intersection of social factors overcomes the limitations of the earlier versions of feminism and provides a proper basis for self-criticism and dialogue with other theoretical approaches. Undoubtedly, it helps feminism to be more inclusive and to reach beyond women’s issues or methodologically being isolated. Critical engagement in feminism can enrich it and provokes more inclusive perspectives in favor of subordinated women.

“A set of theoretical, methodological and, of course, political issues are involved in the absence and the downplay of women” (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 25). It is noteworthy that because of its different form, women’s resistance has often been omitted from the history recorded and told by those in power (Aptheker 1989: 169). In this regard, Aptheker’s words are significant: “There is a women’s resistance that is not ‘feminist’, ‘socialist’, ‘radical’, or ‘liberal’ because it does not come out of an understanding of one or another social theory, and it is not informed by experience in conventional politics” (Aptheker 1989: 173). The writing of the history of women should democratize history and contribute to the reinterpretation of the role of marginalized groups and “what the supermodern power machine does not want to be shown” (González-Ruibal 2008: 247).

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Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist

Alex Sager

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Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist

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James C. Scott was the most incisive theorist of the state for people who are ambivalent about the state’s existence. He was a major theorist of power, revealing the covert weapons that groups without formal, coercive power wield against the state and its representatives. He pioneered ethnography in political science, insisting throughout his career on dangers of neglecting local context and knowledge. In doing so, he expanded our understanding of politics to include the politics of peasants, pre-state, and stateless people.

Despite Scott’s eminence and his relevance to central questions in the field, his thought remains at the margins of political theory. The field has barely begun to mine the potential of Scott’s scholarship for new insights and research programs. If there is a theme that unifies Scott’s major works, it is the need to dispel state myths and to uncover and examine social and political life that are omitted or distorted by state agents (among whom are academics, especially political scientists). Scott dedicated his career to overcoming a major blind spot: that much of our evidence is produced by states. He consistently applied an “anarchist squint” to political life, illuminating features that otherwise remained invisible (Scott 2014).

Scott began his career as a southeast Asian specialist during the Vietnam war. Like many, he became disillusioned with the outcome of the wars of national liberation, which in most cases resulted in more powerful, authoritarian states (Vinthagen 2017). His intellectual journey took him through peasant studies, anthropological investigations of non-state peoples, and, ultimately, to archaeology and geology. While researching his first book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1977), he came to see the inadequacy of the archives, which captured only the official story. Largely absent were the peasantry, whose politics occurs primarily outside the hearing of government officials and landlords – what Scott calls “the hidden transcript.”

In response, Scott took an unusual step for a political scientist, conducting ethnographic research in a Malaysian rice-growing village. We know about peasant rebellions when state authorities note them, but not about peasant resistance that occurs undetected by their feudal lords. Scott’s pioneering use of field work in political theory resulted in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), chronicling the conflicts arising from the introduction of combine-harvesting machines. It is a classic study of resistance under non-democratic conditions where overt political action – labor organization, petitions, marches, and so on – was not possible. Instead, peasants engaged in what Scott termed “infrapolitics,” foot-dragging, sabotage, slander, feigned ignorance, and other tactics that often led to change without overt confrontation. Scott synthesized these insights in a major contribution to political theory, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1980).

His investigations of the state continued in *Seeing Like a State*, on how states bureaucrats develop homogenous simplifications to measure and thereby control their populations and environments. This erases local differences and knowledge, often with disastrous effects. *The Art of Not Being Governed* serves as a foil to *Seeing Like a State*, presenting the anti-state rationality of non-state peoples. Toward the end of his career, he also engaged deeply with archaeology, especially in his penultimate book, *Against the Grain*, an exercise in deep history, beginning with the use of fire 400,000 years ago. In *Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life It Brings* appears posthumously in 2025 (Scott 2025).

The mark of a great theorist is that they teach you to see the world differently. *The Art of Not Being Governed* transformed my perception. I was working on a book on the political philosophy of human migration that attempted to break free from state-centered perspectives. Inspired by writings that centered the nomad or the migrant (Deleuze

and Guattari 1987; Nail 2015; De Genova 2017), I urged that political theorists should try to “see like a migrant” as a heuristic for reevaluating their normative theories (the phrase “see like a migrant” was indebted, of course, to Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*).

Quickly, I encountered a difficulty: how *not* to see like a state? We are socialized by state institutions, including universities, in which much of our curriculum and our sources of funding addresses problems articulated by states. In the political theory of migration, one of the major issues is state force against migrants. How do we theorize state coercion and violence without privileging the perspective of state administrations and legal regimes? It is difficult to imagine how to not to see like a state in the contemporary world, in large part because there does not seem to be a viable alternative.

The Art of Not Being Governed was a revelation. In the popular imagination, stateless societies are small groups of primitive peoples whose limited contact with state authorities has left them ignorant of the advantages of modernity. In response to this misconception, *The Art of Not Being Governed* synthesizes the literature on Zomia, a term put forward by Willem van Schendel (2005) to describe an area in the highlands of southeast Asia largely independent of state control. Zomia spans ten countries and includes perhaps a hundred million people.

Building on Pierre Clastres’ research in Latin America (Clastres 2022), Scott contends that the people of Zomia should not be understood independently of the state; rather, they are fleeing state taxation, conscription, and slavery. They have constructed ways of life to resist state incorporation, so that features of non-state societies that initially seem like deficits, such as shifting cultivation or the absence of writing, become advantages. After reading *The Art of Not Being Governed*, I began to see houseless people resisting police efforts to place them in shelters or cooperatives run on barter as a conscious strategy to evade state discipline and coercion. As Scott observes in *Against the Grain*:

“Yet there is massive evidence of determined resistance by mobile peoples everywhere to permanent settlement, even under relatively favorable circumstances. Pastoralists and hunting-and-gathering populations have fought against permanent settlement, associating it, often correctly, with disease and state control.” (Scott 2017: 8)

This allows us to see mobile people eluding state surveillance and forming the mutual aid networks for migrant journeys across continents as efforts to construct spaces against state violence.

The Art of Not Being Governed is a major work by a political scientist (albeit one closely associated with anthropology). It provides a template for thinking about the state through the eyes of people who consciously elude its grasp. Nonetheless, this anarchist history of Zomia has not had a major impact on political theory. In an otherwise perceptive response, Stephen Krasner ends with a paean to the contemporary, well-governed state, rehearsing the familiar narrative of its role in the scientific and industrial revolutions and modern medicine: “There is more wisdom in Hobbes, or at least Locke, than Scott allows” (Krasner 2011: 83).

Krasner’s remark is a common reaction among political scientists responding to Scott’s work, especially *The Art of Not Being Governed* and *Against the Grain*. It misses the mark. Nowhere does Scott advocate a reversion to pre-state forms of social organization or the creation of more Zomias to evade existing states. Scott’s work should not be read as a paean to non-state societies, which have their own pathologies (though he affirms some of their advantages). Rather, he is best read as a critical theorist, focusing our gaze on subjects and societies that have been largely neglected. In doing so, he reveals problematic logics of dominant institutions.

I suggest three reasons for political theorists’ comparative neglect of Scott. First, Scott’s work eludes easy incorporation into any political ideology. Carelessly read, *Seeing Like a State* plays well into the hands of libertarians, as it provides a trenchant critique of state planning. There may be some overlap with Frederick Hayek’s insights on the failures and dangers of state planning, but Scott is just as critical of the market and large-scale capitalism. Corporations also impose control through simplification and quantification, oblivious to or contemptuous of local expertise and ways of life.

Second, anarchism remains intellectually disreputable among the liberals and Marxists. Political scientists, whose subject is state politics, tend to see anarchist leanings (at least outside of international relations) as naïve, utopian, and irrelevant. Furthermore, anarchist practices such as mutual aid and consensus-based decision-making resist

systematization and reduction to general principles. Anarchism sympathies best suit those, like Scott, who value local knowledge and thick description over abstract principles.

Third, political theory is still in the thralls of a founding myth: pre-political “man” lives in a state of nature, with no law, no political authority. Thomas Hobbes described this state as a time of war. To escape, pre-state people come together and form a social contract in which they give away their rights to a sovereign, in exchange for security. The state of nature and the character of social contract comes in many variations, whether it is Hobbes’ absolutist sovereign, John Locke’s sovereign bound by the law of nature, or John Rawls’ appropriation of Immanuel Kant for 20th century liberal egalitarianism.

Social contract theory has two notable features. First, the social contract and the state of nature are fictions, not historical events or diligent descriptions of pre-state life. Second, the social contract serves to legitimize state power by insisting that people are better off. The state is a benefactor, imposing law, upholding natural rights, and solving coordination problems.

The stories we tell matter. The social contract has always been a pro-state story that obfuscates the role of usurpation and conquest, something historically minded political philosophers, starting with David Hume, observed. Like contemporary political scientists, though, Hume ultimately justified the state, despite its bloody origins, rejecting its fiction but endorsing its benefits. Scott, in contrast, writes:

“If the formation of earliest states were shown to be largely a coercive enterprise, the vision of the state, one dear to the heart of such social-contract theorists as Hobbes and Locke, as a magnet of civil peace, social order, and freedom from fear, drawing people in by its charisma, would have to be reexamined.” (Scott 2017: 26–27)

In *Against the Grain*, Scott established that, compared to the alternatives, the state did not benefit most people for most of human history.

Doesn’t Scott commit the genetic fallacy, dismissing the modern, administrative state’s achievements because of its bloody origins? This criticism goes astray. First, *The Art of Not Being Governed* shows that *millions* of people today prefer to forgo the advantages of life outside of the state. This is not a detail to be dismissed, but rather confronts us with the question of whether compulsory incorporation into even well-governed states is just. Second, Scott’s target is social-contract ideology, not the contemporary state. Political theorists often miss this distinction because they conflate the story they tell about the state with its reality.

In this respect, his criticism is akin to the observation that the social contract has often been a sexual, racial, or settler contract, legitimizing the domination and oppression of female, non-white, and indigenous people (Pateman 1988; Mills 1997; Nichols 2013). Actually-existing liberalism (rooted in social contract theory) has been a long history of providing apologetics for imperial and colonial projects (Losurdo 2011). To this we can add that state-building is historically and presently to the benefit of some people at a cost to others.

This does not entail abolishing the state, no doubt the sort of utopian project that would have earned Scott’s scorn. But it does call for recognizing the limits of state logics and the need for zones of autonomy. Today, governments and corporations are relentlessly quantifying every aspect of our lives to surveil and control. Scott reminds us of what quantification fails to capture, but also how in its quest to bend people and the world to its metrics, it destroys much of what gives life value. The removal of all possibility of exit from state discipline diminishes human freedom and flourishing. As he observes,

“The real damage of relying mainly on quantitatively measured merit and ‘objective’ numerical audit systems to assess quality arises from taking vital questions that ought to be part of a vigorous democratic debate off the table and placing them in the hands of presumably neutral experts.” (Scott 2014: 121)

Scott’s other contribution to political theory is methodological. Recent calls to incorporate fieldwork into political theory are very much in debt to Scott (Longo and Zacka 2019). Fieldwork teaches us about the value of local, informal processes that necessarily sustain much of social and political life. It reveals the limitations of theoretical abstractions and the danger that these abstractions, if imposed by force, will impoverish the lives of local communities.

Furthermore, Scott brings history – including deep history – into the conversation. Political theory has a limited time horizon. At most, it dates back 2500 years to the ancient Greeks. In most cases, its subject is political life beginning in the 17th century, where we begin to see the emergence of something like the modern state. But political life throughout human history took place outside of states. Much of this history is invisible to official state histories and to the social sciences that are funded and shaped by state prerogatives. Scott shows us how non-state histories can open our minds to the full breadth of human possibility and transform our understanding of politics.

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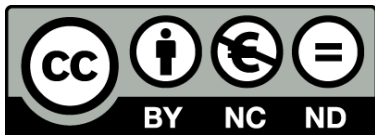
Flipping the Script: Upending Approaches to Power in the Work of James C. Scott

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Flipping the Script: Upending Approaches to Power in the Work of James C. Scott

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Introduction

“Lacking a comprehensive anarchist worldview and philosophy, and in any case wary of nomothetic ways of seeing, I am making a case for a sort of anarchist squint. What I aim to show is that if you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle.” (Scott 2012: xii)

When you read about James Scott, you commonly come across words such as ‘provocative,’ ‘contrarian,’ alongside ‘counter-narrative’ – such are the attempts to place his histories as outside the mainstream of thought. For this reason alone, his work is so worthwhile. He has always offered a striking perspective that can have a lasting influence on how you view things thereafter. In a way, he finds the blind spots in much of historical and cultural perspectives, and shows us how much we miss when not shining the light in such directions.

I maintain here that it is the anarchistic elements of Scott’s thought that leads him to address the blind spots of others. He developed his anarchist perspective increasingly throughout his books, culminating in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) and *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (2012). At first, he described how he characterized political organizations in his lectures and seminars in ways in which he found himself noticing how much they shared with anarchist perspectives, finding himself saying, “Now, that sounds like what an anarchist would argue” (Scott 2012: ix; see also 2020: 64; Holmes 2023). So, he began to explore anarchist theorists more closely, and in the process he even taught a course on anarchism at Yale.

We should note that his anarchism is not at full throttle. After all, he did only offer “two cheers” (2012) for it, not three, but the weight of his scholarship is surely towards the anarchist side. In this sense, Scott represents one of the few prominent intellectuals that opted to work in this vein, alongside the contributions of Noam Chomsky (2005, 2013) or David Graeber (e.g., 2004, 2009, 2020). There are also several works that collect together scholars working in this direction for the social sciences, social movements, and theory (e.g., Shukaitis et al. 2007; Klausen and Martel 2011; Lilley and Shantz 2015; Levy and Newman 2019), all of which reveals that there’s been an increasing turn to this line of thought, after a period in which Marxist thinking was more common in the academy.

Here, I discuss how Scott’s lifework has had an important influence on archaeology, anthropology, political science, and history through his theoretical approach in addition to several concepts that he developed that have been useful for considering political dynamics at various scales, in ancient early states (and their peripheries) to contemporary states and non-state regions such as the *zomias* of Southeast Asia. Throughout, I emphasize how Scott’s thinking upends so many common perspectives about political dynamics.

Scott “Flips the Script”

“A great many barbarians, then, were not primitives who had stayed or been left behind but rather political and economic refugees who had fled to the periphery to escape state-induced poverty, taxes, bondage, and war.” (Scott 2017: 234)

One of the main aspects to Scott’s thought is that he commonly flips the script in contrast to most approaches towards cultures of the present and the past. He does not take the perspective of the apex position, or that of the *arché*. Instead of views from the top of the temple mound, Scott views things from the perspectives of the bulk of people in society. Or, when he does look from above, as with *Seeing Like a State* (1998), it’s to demonstrate the problems with the State’s gaze.¹ In this way, he shares in the notion of a “people’s history” like that pioneered by Howard Zinn (1980), to shift away from a perspective that is not from that of pharaohs or kings, presidents and prime ministers; Zinn’s work, of course, has influenced others (e.g., Bass 2009; Dunbar-Ortiz 2013; Harman 2017), and it aligns with Eric Wolf’s (1982) recounting of “people without history,” also oriented to portray the history of those left out of traditional narratives, those without monuments to etch their accomplishments. Yet, while most “people’s histories” are a chronicle from another vantage point, Scott goes much further than most do. Scott analyzes the actions of what they do in practice, in specific historical settings, such as the highlands of Southeast Asia or the lowlands of early Mesopotamia, even as those studies uncover patterns that are applicable for analyses in other situations. In the process, he develops concepts of the ‘hidden transcript,’ ‘weapons of the weak,’ or what he referred to more generally as ‘infrapolitics’ (Scott 1985, 1990). Plus, he has offered alternate perspectives upon numerous cultural aspects, whether it concerns the anarchic structure of ‘barbarian’ regions hovering in the peripheries of states, *zomia* as ungoverned zones, or the fragility of the power of state governments themselves (Scott 2009). It’s worthwhile to consider some examples of how he upends common approaches to political analyses.

Many have regarded ‘barbarian’ areas as simply undisciplined, or even precisely what happens in the absence of a Hobbesian Leviathan. But Scott (2017: 255) shows how the so-called ‘barbarians’ – a loose characterization of non-state peoples generally – were healthier and freer than those within states. They lived longer, were taller, and ate healthier, in part due to a subsistence that relied upon a much broader basis of foods. Plus, they had more leisure time, and were generally not subject to the classes of superiors. In this sense, he does what Marshall Sahlins (1972) did for foragers in presenting the ‘original affluent society’, in contrast to the idea that hunter-gatherers were in a constant struggle for existence.

Similar studies apply to recent treatments of pirate societies, which also engage in what Scott (2009: 89, 2017: 172) would call, after Max Weber (2013 [1930]), “booty capitalism.” This refers to how groups basically can pursue, typically through militant means, profit from plundering trade routes or other peoples. The loot is redistributed among the group’s members in a manner like a “joint-stock company” (Scott 2017: 172). Pirates often operated in such ways. Peter Leeson (2007, 2014) has shown that pirates organized themselves in ways that promoted the redistribution of goods and prevented captains from accumulating excessive amounts of wealth. They also developed institutions to maintain order among the crew. In so doing, Leeson applied an anarchist approach to pirate cultures, as others have done, such as Gabriel Kuhn’s (2009) study of Caribbean pirates and David Graeber’s (2023) research on pirate societies in Madagascar from their heyday in the late 1600s through 1700s. For groups that were often violent towards others, they treated each other in remarkably egalitarian ways – this led to Graeber’s (2023) suggestion of a “pirate Enlightenment.”

Another example of how Scott flips the script is the way he treats the ‘collapse’ of states throughout the past. In conjunction with words like ‘fall’ or ‘decline’ in regards to societies, such terms reveal their bias right on the surface as to which kind of sociopolitical structure is preferred by the author (Borck and Sanger 2017: 11). Similar biases are seen as well in describing periods of ‘cultural climax,’ ‘high point,’ or ‘peak.’ Such terms do not reveal a scientific or neutral attitude toward the archaeological record. Scott (2017: 209) is quite good at undermining these common tropes, writing, “Why deplore ‘collapse,’ when the situation it depicts is most often the disaggregation of a complex, fragile, and typically oppressive state into smaller, decentralized fragments?” Further, these periods

1 Hereon, I’ll use the capitalized form of ‘State’ to refer to the reified state forms in common with much of Scott’s description, which aligns with much of anarchist thinking. I do think that emerging within these are other forms that do not advance such aims of the centralization of power; that unions, civil rights, suffragette, abolitionist, and other sociopolitical movements have institutionalized many protections that constrain the aspects of States.

may have “represented a bolt for freedom by many state subjects and an improvement in human welfare” (Scott 2017: 209).

Scott’s theoretical contributions extend beyond the shifting of vantage-points for analysis. His work has also provided critical tools for analyzing how resistance manifests in material culture and social practices, influencing a broad range of archaeological studies as well. Alfred González-Ruibal (2014) has applied Scott’s work in his analyses of the borderlands of Ethiopia and other areas, where communities such as the Gumuz, Bertha, and Mao exert efforts to resist the imposition of state authority. He argues that such expressions of resistance are apparent through their material culture and practices. Scott’s (1985, 1990) emphases on hidden transcripts describes how oppressed peoples find ways to not overtly critique authorities, that these are “veiled forms of resistance that allow the subaltern to get their way to a point, without openly opposing power (which can be dangerous)” (González-Ruibal 2014: 9); for this reason, González-Ruibal refers to this as “resilience, rather than resistance.” He makes useful distinctions between resilience, resistance, and rebellion. Resilience occurs a lot, but is not overt, and for this reason, González-Ruibal (2014: 9–10) refers to it as politically acting on an “unconscious level, beyond discourse,” where traditional and local practices continue despite the presence or impositions of oppressive authorities. Resistance is more politically conscious and tactical, challenging structural authorities through syncretic adaptations of local and external symbols in material culture or through symbolic aspects of their practices. Rebellions are the overt and politically explicit actions that leave archaeological remnants in weapons or defensive sites; “rebellion implies a political consciousness”; these three forms embody “different forms of being against domination” (González-Ruibal 2014: 10). In this way, we see how foundation for further theoretical applications towards traces of resistance throughout the past.

In overturning common approaches, Scott has opened the perspective to further such analyses. Indeed, many have explicitly applied analyses in a Scottian vein, such as Bengt Karlsson’s (2013) ethnographic study of subaltern peoples in Northeast India, Mark Hauser and Douglas Armstrong’s (2012) archaeological study of settlements in the Caribbean as “arts of resistance”, or Richard Horsley’s (2004) “hidden transcripts” approach towards early Christianity.

The State as Separate from Society

Scott describes States as parasitic sociopolitical formations, where many within the scope of the polity are unfree. His work, along with Graeber’s (e.g., 2006), highlights the degree of unfreedom within most states. In this way, Scott helps us think more concretely about the construction of the State form itself. Those subjected to the exploitative nature of power often evade the reach of the State, seeking refuge in the margins – going ‘off the map’ into so-called barbarian regions, forming maroon societies, or retreating to places like the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina and Virginia (Sayers 2014). In this way, Scott has detailed how ‘barbarians’ form in conjunction with States, such that the periphery is important to the State as a core (Scott 2017).

Scott also helps us remain conscious that States are separate from society, much as Pierre Clastres (1987) emphasized, in his *Society Against the State*. Accordingly, the State concerns the interests of a subset of society (i.e. elites). States structure power to ensure their continuing position, combined with the perpetual pursuit of finding ways to increase their profits and surpluses from the rest of society. In this sense, all States are oligarchies.

In his discussions of the fragility of states, Scott suggested that political forms have a Leachian quality, meaning that the political formations can readily shift over time. In Edmund Leach’s (1954) classic study of Burmese societies, which Scott often discussed, there was a fluidity in their political forms over time, involving alterations or oscillations between *gumsa gumlao* political structures. Accordingly, the *gumsa* formation was a nascent hierarchy, but unstable. The *gumlao* form, however, was resistant to hierarchy, and formed an example of active state prevention (Scott 2009: 214–216); Jonathan Friedman (1998) developed this argument, adding historical or diachronic contexts and dynamics to Leach’s (1954) synthetic model, which Scott (2009: 355) cited with approval. In this active prevention of the centralization of power, we find affinities to Clastres’ (1987) arguments. As Scott turns to the archaeological record, he finds the innumerable chronicles of States rising and collapsing due to war, droughts, epidemics, and so on (Scott 2017: 7), and the Leachian dynamics and oscillations are present. While, ideologically,

those ruling states always imagine some perpetuity, they succumb to collapse like any and all other political formations. As archaeologists know well, everything that has a beginning also has an ending (Rosen 2019).

Assertions of Power are Met with Resistance

“The condensation of history, our desire for clean narratives, and the need for elites and organizations to project an image of control and purpose all conspire to convey a false image of historical causation. They blind us to the fact that most revolutions are not the work of revolutionary parties but the precipitate of spontaneous and improvised action [...], and that the great emancipatory gains for human freedom have not been the result of orderly, institutional procedures but of disorderly, unpredictable, spontaneous action cracking open the social order from below.” (Scott 2012: 141)

Scott has often reoriented our focus towards other forms of power, those of the oppressed or governed. While power is often viewed as applicable to those ‘in power,’ in positions of authority, with the ability to coerce, as ‘power over’ others, Scott focuses on the power from below, more in alignment with Hannah Arendt’s (1958) notions of power, in reference to collective action, to ‘act in concert’ with others. Some have expanded upon Scott’s approach to describe the dynamics of non-state polities operating as actively working against concentrations of power, in contrast to states. Raúl Zibechi (2010: 55), for instance, describes Bolivian Aymara communities as “dispersal machines” that actively inhibit the concentration of power; in this sense, he highlights the significance of the work of Clastres (1987) and Scott (2009) for such dynamics.

Archaeologists increasingly are focusing on bottom-up aspects of power, as the title of T. L. Thurston and Manuel Fernández-Götz’s (2021a) recent edited volume indicates: *Power from Below in Premodern Societies*. As the editors state, “The point of raising issues of self- or co-organization and self- or co-management [from the bottom up or local scales] is not to reject the existence of inequality or the power of leaders and rulers, but to grant reasonable agency to others, gaining a more realistic view of the past and a better reading of our data” (Thurston and Fernández-Götz 2021b: 5). They also draw explicitly upon Scott’s (1985, 2009) work to highlight opposition to “those ‘above,’” particularly through the act of departing to join other communities or establishing new ones (Thurston and Fernández-Götz 2021c: 298).

Scott often grappled with Michel Foucault’s theories, for whom social relationships were imbued with power. For Foucault, even relations of dominance entail the giving of power to the person claiming it, even if they are planning for rebellion or abandonment of their situation at some point in the future. In this way, power is never totalizing, for then it would no longer be a form of power. There is always some degree of freedom present on any side of a power relation; hence, one could not exert power over a robot, due its lack of existential consciousness and freedom. Furthermore, Foucault (Gordon 1980: 142) stated that, “there are no relations of power without resistances.” Therefore, one could say that Foucault presented a social science variant on Newton’s third law of motion, “To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction,” which would be: “To every application of power there is an opposing resistance” – even if generally not always an equal reaction or at the same time. Scott’s focus on the “weapons of the weak” and the “arts of resistance” adds ethnographic and historic cases that complement and expand upon Foucault’s analyses of power.

The Seeming Eruption of Politics from Below

“When the first declaration of the hidden transcript succeeds, its mobilization capacity as a symbolic act is potentially awesome. [...] It portends a possible turning of the tables. [...] At the level of political beliefs, anger, and dreams it is a social *explosion*.” (Scott 1990: 227; emphasis added)

Geo Maher is one scholar who has recently expanded upon the power of the oppressed. In his excellent *Anti-colonial Eruptions* (Maher 2022), he draws on Scott at many points, as well as heavily on Frantz Fanon (2007 [1963], 2008 [1952]), when he discussed how the power of the underclass is not just in the foot-dragging, the work-only-to-the-rule practices, or other infrapolitics. Rather, Maher focuses on cases where the oppressed groups appear to explode outright, upending assertions of power from oppressors. The metaphor that Maher finds to be commonly used to describe revolutionary moments, such as the Haitian Revolution circa 1800, is ‘eruption.’ To

use such allusions, the oppressors reveal that they are not very good at seeing the resistance of the oppressed. The colonizers have a blind spot, which comes with their ideology of superiority: they assume that the oppressed are no threat because they deem them to be inferior. They imagine themselves as intelligent and rational and those they enslave as akin to lesser animals, relegating them essentially to a “zone of nonbeing”, in Fanon’s words (2008: 2). For such reasons, any acts of resistance appear as “cunning” and unexpected. In a dialectical reversal, Maher (2022) highlights how the ideologies of colonists, for instance, are also their Achilles’ heel, providing opportunities for the oppressed to seemingly appear as if rebellion is sudden. Their blindspots afford the oppressed a “second sight” into the nature of the overt thinking of the oppressors, as servants within the house knowing the master closely. Maher’s recounting moves from minor strategies of resistance to full-out forms of revolution. With his notion of the “second sight” of the oppressed, Maher (2022) detailed how the state is viewed from the perspective of the oppressed.

For James Martel (2022), the State ‘sees’ things from the perspective of the *arché*, or an ‘archist’ position. The state is only one of many anarchist positions, as others can be marked by lineage patriarchs, bosses, CEOs – or really anyone acting in authoritarian ways. The State as an empire is simply the largest scale of authoritarian expressions. In contrast to Scott’s (1998) “seeing like a state,” he shifts the vantage point to “seeing like an anarchist.” Martel (2022: 18) offers that “anarchist sight organizes just as much as anarchist sight does, but it organizes horizontally among and between the community rather than from above.” Furthermore, he argues that such views are much more common than realized, since grand narratives take on the State-centric position. As he puts it:

“If Scott’s account is credible and if it can be generalized, it suggests once again that it is not anarchism but archism that has to swim against the current of a universe given to entropy and diffusion rather than to stasis and control [...]. Archism in this view has to work very hard to keep itself in power, and anarchism has the advantage of being a political form that requires no coercion, no mythic violence, and no spectacularity, none of that extra effort that archism must ceaselessly engage in to be able to ‘exist’ at all.” (Martel 2022: 269)

Here, Martel (2022: 269) reiterates a point strongly made by Scott (2017) that early states, for instance, were fragile, constantly working to support their claims of sovereignty: building temples to justify their divine sources of authority; building walls to keep barbarian threats out (and their taxable citizens within), and so on. Martel (2022: 269–270) writes that oppressed communities, for Scott, are “always resisting archism.” Yet, while agreeing with Scott, he also builds upon and emphasizes that:

“collectivities do not only engage in resistance. They also engage in collective forms of politics in their own right; whenever they speak to each other, whenever customs arise, whenever collective judgments are engaged with, whenever people have a chance to experience themselves as a collectivity, even – or maybe especially – one marked by disharmony and disagreement, some kind of alternative form of political power is being exercised and created as well. This too is anarchy.” (Martel 2022: 269–270)

For Martel (2022: 292), archists are a political “parasite, a vampire that feeds off the life it oversees,” which for him helps to explain the fragility of early states that Scott describes. Over millennia, however, States seemed to have lost much of their fragility.

On the State as Not Necessarily Centralized (Or So Separate from Society)

“Unlike many anarchist thinkers, I do not believe that the state is everywhere and always the enemy of freedom.” (Scott 2012: xiii)

Some superficial readings of Scott might regard him as entirely opposed to the state, but he clearly was not. We could say that he was opposed to the capital-S State, with a reified oligarchy that maintains its separation from the masses. As one example, he emphasized that one “need only recall the scene of the federalized National Guard leading black children to school through a menacing crowd of angry whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to realize that the state can, *in some circumstances*, play an emancipatory role” (Scott 2012: xiv, emphasis in the original). This shares Pierre Bourdieu’s (1998) notion that capitalism in its neoliberal instantiation aims to tear down collective laws that have been established in such institutions.

Scott (2012: xiv) argued that such rights as protected by the state have only been a recent phenomenon in the history of states, that “only in the last two centuries or so has even the possibility arisen that states might occasionally enlarge the realm of human freedom.” Such developments only occurred, Scott (2012: xiv) maintained, when “disruption from below” formed a threat to the State itself.

As William Remley (2018: 2) has argued, anarchist thought does not aim for no government at all, but “it puts into question the type of government allowing for the peaceful coexistence of all human beings while safeguarding individual freedom.” So, Remley (2018: 11) is clear that anarchists have often criticized the state, as Scott does, but “nothing precludes a state from becoming legitimate.” In this way, Scott’s thinking in this regard has parallels with others.

Scott (2012: xv) does point to the ‘structural violence’ inherent in the presence of States, emphasizing that “huge disparities in wealth, property, and status make a mockery of freedom.”

“This, of course, [...] is the great dilemma for an anarchist. If relative equality is a necessary condition of mutuality and freedom, how can it be guaranteed except through the state? Facing this conundrum, I believe that both theoretically and practically, the abolition of the state is not an option. We are stuck, alas, with Leviathan, though not at all for the reasons Hobbes had supposed, and the challenge is to tame it.” (Scott 2012: xvi)

This shows that Scott is not just a scholar who applies anarchist thought, but that he is one who is also providing critique to better hone anarchist theory.

Overarching Theme: Dialectical Relations

“So, apropos of the counter-narrative theme, it seems to me, I’m rather proud that I did not follow the forced march of my discipline, and that I decided for personal and intellectual reasons to do things that were heterodox and at the margin of my discipline, and at least as a topic and as methodology that is not respected, and I ended up making a pretty good career out of being a dissident, if you like. And if I’m proud of that—I think I’m proud that I did it, of course, but I’m also proud that I hope that encourages other people to take similar kinds of risks, and not to sort of knuckle under to the orthodoxy.” (Scott 2020: 111–112)

Here, I have considered the works of a thinker who set out in dissident directions within his discipline, resulting in broad influences on other social sciences. This is all the more surprising, given that he had spent some of his early career writing reports for the CIA about Burma and other countries (Scott 2020: 9). It is quite the irony. Perhaps those experiences, in a dialectical kind of way, spurred him to reconsider his “Seeing for the State” and to focus on non-State dynamics for the rest of his career.

It is clear that Scott demonstrates the utility of an anarchist perspective, or ‘squint,’ for historical and archaeological studies. In his work, he was always willing to challenge predominant perspectives, to take an outsider perspective. In the process, he expanded our understanding of the workings of power and set the foundation and example for other scholars to proceed. He offers ways for archaeologists to think through the agency and power of oppressed peoples as they express their aims through hidden transcripts, infrapolitics, and other weapons of the weak, including tactics of State evasion and prevention.

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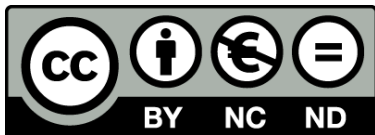
State Borders, Other Orders

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State Borders, Other Orders

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Jim Scott¹ returned time and again to the topic of how states produced land cadasters (and vice-versa). “[A] state cadastral map,” he wrote in *Seeing Like a State*, “created to designate taxable property-holders does not merely describe a system of land tenure; it creates such a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law” (1998: 3). This is lyrical and axiomatic. But best of all, not content to point out the artificiality of a system, Jim pressed on to pursue the *purpose* states had in simulating powers. The cadaster performs a kind of ontological alchemy: it not only helps to create state capacity, but it grounds it in ways of knowing (as law, as science) which are discursively fixed and unquestionable, with obvious political benefits. As he did with everything from moral economies to grain baskets, Jim always forged ahead to think through why forms of control worked – how they served state projects – and not just expose them.

Whether Jim’s legions of readers always follow along to the ends of his arguments is less clear. A man much cited and oft quoted has given us subtleties which do not always precipitate into post-Scottian investigations of ancient states. Nowhere is this so true as for misunderstandings of the sotto voce distinctions he made between landscape, territory, and sovereign land at various levels of analytic control. Jim was sensitive to the difference, for instance, between how ancient grain states conceived of land in terms of production, whereas early modern states rationalized it in areal terms. He was always on the lookout for practical outcomes: how cadastral information produced grain yields, and then how those rents were shaped to state satisfaction by baskets and strickles.

The political borders and boundaries of states are among their technologies of control, forms of “synoptic data [which] are the points of departure for reality as state officials apprehend and shape it” (Scott 1998: 83). Yet he was equally aware that the geography of ancient states could not be so easily bounded, “fragmented” as its productive zones were by “fiscally sterile” and unincorporated populations (Scott 2020: 230).

Notwithstanding, it is routine for historians of Mesopotamia to speak of state “borders.” The conundrum represented itself to me recently as I sat in a conference about migration and population movements in antiquity. Virtually every paper enjoined some concept of borders and boundaries in one way or another. The same papers all took trouble to put daylight between ancient and modern concepts of borders: they identified ancient boundaries as socio-political constructs; admitted that they were emically un- or under-defined; proclaimed their limited applicability to ethnic, linguistic, and economic identities and activities. Yet, having made these disclaimers, everyone still bounded ahead to treat geographic borders as an analytically valid concept.²

But what if they’re not? Can we give more serious attention to the conception of state territory in the pre-cadastral world? Is our interest in defining ancient states so “scientific” that we must impute to them a geographic integrity so misleading that it pins them to a board like so many butterflies? I will try here to give body to some of the ways in which concepts of borders are profoundly anachronistic to ancient Mesopotamian contexts and then consider a potential way to think about the geographic embeddedness of ancient states in relation to their “Others,” the great and little-documented world of non-state people, places, and production.

1 Jim was the one person whom I and my sister Sophie Richardson (a scholar of and advocate for human rights in the very modern world) both knew professionally, which made for a nice point in common.

2 The online catalogue of the Research Archives of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (Chicago) returns more than 200 works published since 2010 on ancient Near Eastern topics with “border” (not “borderlands”), “boundary,” or “frontier” in their titles.

One is struck by the insufficiency of Mesopotamian technologies for the purpose of controlling territorial integrity in two related senses: neither for Latin *finis* or *limes* as boundaries of *extent* on the one hand, or the modern sense boundaries as *enclosing* a politically defined space on the other. This is to say nothing about the imaginative and mathematical capacities of Mesopotamian cultures, which developed many sophisticated methods for measuring and accounting. But these skills were little turned to the production of territoriality such that state (or even city-state) borders were operable attributes prior to the first millennium BCE. “Insufficiency” here does not mean incapability, only that the task of drawing borders to which the relevant technologies might have been put was irrelevant. This is demonstrable for Mesopotamia along many lines, some of which I list below. Many of these points will be long familiar to archaeologists in spirit, if not detail, but I think there is a purpose to bring them together in this way.³

1. There is an absence of cartographic representations of space in Mesopotamia much beyond depictions of fields or individual buildings – plans rather than maps, spatial illustrations largely divorced from relative and absolute spaces. A few well-known city plans (and the late, so-called ‘Babylonian Map of the World’⁴) notwithstanding, this culture never created any larger relational system to represent geographical space. In this respect, no borders could ever be fixed in relation to other places or spaces contained within them.
2. Nor do we have actual cadasters beyond lists of fields in local districts. Even the 21st century BCE “Ur-Namma Cadaster” only defines specific tracts of land which were parts of various temple estates, not anything like the “lands of the state”.⁵ The highly detailed documentation of fields in Ur III Umma (Molina and Steinkeller 2017, with literature) and Old Babylonian Larsa (Richardson 2008, 2015: 279–292) were limited to describing tracts under production. We should take seriously the implications of sustained and long-lived projects to document specific productive fields and districts but never *all* land of the state.
3. Nor again do we have any catalogs of toponyms from any period with pretensions to give a textual picture of individual states or the known world. In fact, most place-names are very poorly integrated into the world of textuality generally. Textualized representations of topographical space, such as itineraries or sections in word lists such as Ur₅-ra,⁶ were written for purposes of trade or scribal education, not for the sake of transforming toponymy into geography. And the way toponyms were used generally presents an even more bewildering picture: for instance, we know of about 2,000 toponyms for the Old Babylonian period, derived from about 19,000 texts. These large numbers might lead one to believe that both ancient scribes and modern scholars had/have a lot of knowledge about ancient geography. But about 62% of those 2,000 toponyms are attested only one, two, or three times; 41% are attested only once. Despite this ubiquity of poorly attested place, there are virtually no indications that scribes had any trouble knowing *where* these places were, how to get there, or knowing how to spell their names. In no way do we get the sense that the location of unusual places was unknown or problematic. We thus face the confusing situation that there was a high degree of fidelity in documenting place names at the same time there was a very low concern about documenting *where* those places were. The conception of the toponymized world, sophisticated and specific as it was, did not translate into any interest in its spatial composition. To this problem I will return briefly below.
4. Few ancient *linear* boundary markers are known from ancient descriptions or modern archaeological surveys. The levees, meadows, and wadis, which made up most portrayals of boundaries, occupied discrete areas and were non-contiguous, only partial boundaries. Man-made border markers were single-point features – shrines, wells, and monuments – visible only at their *in situ* locations, unrelated to areal space, and perishable (indeed, one of the very first things we ever learn about these early and impermanent boundary markers is that they

3 I make no pretension here to a full study; for more comprehensive attention to theory and detail, see, for example, the collections of essays edited by Osborne and VanValkenburgh 2013 and d’Alfonso and Rubinson 2021.

4 For an original take on this unique object, see Delnero 2017.

5 The fragmentary text (RIME 3/2 1.1.21) describes the borders of the fields of various gods. Excluding some long, broken sections, this includes the fields of the gods Numušda of Kiritab (Ex 1 i 13), Numušda of Apiak (Ex 1 ii 21), Šin of an unknown city (Ex 1 iv 21), and Lugal-marda of Marad (Ex 2 iv 30). The first two fields shared one contiguous boundary, but adjacency cannot be established for any other tracts.

6 For OB itineraries, see Goetze 1953 and Hallo 1964; on toponyms in various scholarly lists, Veldhuis 1997: 125 writes that “geographical names hardly function as a set...”

got ripped out all the time⁷). Even if we understand that “boundary stones” would have identified important points in the landscape, we have to admit that those with secure provenances were all found *within* cities and not standing out in their hinterlands at the supposed boundaries. The Early Dynastic Lagaš inscriptions imply that monuments like these measured off linear borders, but their text does not actually make reference to their location in relation to any other geographic point(s); they more or less float in undefined space, boundaries only in loose conceptual terms.⁸

5. There was little that was systematic about the points chosen to mark and describe the borders of early Mesopotamian states. In addition to the kinds of features already mentioned, boundaries were marked by towers, villages, fields, swamps, rivers, canals, and purely conventional and self-referential limits just called “the boundary of god/place {X}.” Especially given the protean character of shifting waterways in the lower alluvium, a reliance on such features points strongly towards boundaries as both improvised and constantly shifting.⁹
6. Despite much attention the thematic importance of state frontiers in the Lagaš-Umma “border war” story – which I have pointed out is the exception to early city-state competition, not the model¹⁰ – *Grenzterminologien* are weakly and inconsistently attested prior to the MA/MB periods, when they gradually began to take on more extensive meanings. In the Old Babylonian period, for example, we have many words for “border” or “boundary,” but most of these refer to the edges of individual fields, streets, or buildings,¹¹ occasionally the outskirts of cities.¹² Two terms do indicate the edges of state control but mostly designate borderlands regions (*aḫītu*) or towns (*āl pāti*) rather than lines marking off territories between two political powers. This accords with the sense we get in Mari letters that various powers tried to fix their mutual borders at single points (e.g., Ḫaradum between Mari and Ešnunna, or Ḫit between Mari and Babylon), not with enclosing and linear borderlines. Only a few uses of *pātu* by itself in the OB refer to a geopolitical border, attested only at Mari. The term shows up only twice in the inscription of any OB king, and only to suggest vague extents of the kingdom, not a hard border.¹³ Thus, even for a period best known for its interstate warfare, there was little expressed concern for boundaries as lines to defend, police, or use for any purpose of administration, taxation, or trade control (Richardson 2012). The uses of *pātu* to mean a state border show that the idea was conceptually available, but of limited use.
7. Relatedly (and combining two points made above), virtually all mensuration technologies related to land were focused on areas and edges of houses and fields. An enormous amount of administrative, legal, and even ritual¹⁴ attention was paid to the specific measurement of the properties that belonged to households, not to political units. To my knowledge, no boundary of any Bronze Age field was ever identified as belonging to another polity.
8. There was little administrative or intelligence apparatus to police interstate borders and territories. This may

7 See E-anatum RIME 1 9.3.2: ii 5–6 (i₃-bu_x [PAD], “ripped”).

8 Described chiefly with the Sumerian verb *ki sur*, “to demarcate,” lit. to “divide off” (*sur*) a “place” (*ki*); also *im-dub*, “to divide off.” The sense that an identifiable border existed is given by the inscriptions’ repeated accusations that leaders of Umma had “crossed” or “transgressed” it (with *bal*). Enmetena in one inscription claims that Mesilim had “stretched out the measuring rope (eš₂) on the field” (RIME 1 9.5.1 i 9–12) but uses the measurement to erect a single-point monument rather than a *borderline*. Jerry Cooper (1983: 33) – acknowledging that “only a small number [of these place names] can be identified with precision” – made an educated guess as to the location of the Lagaš-Umma border, tentatively identifying a “ca. 50–60 km” line between the Tigris and the Nun-canal.

9 Note the many concerns that boundary canals could be actively “shifted” (RIME 1 9.3.1 rev. v 2–3) or dried up (RIME 1 9.5.1. iv 30–33); cf. NB *suḫḫū* v., “to disarrange” a boundary.

10 Richardson 2012: 10–14. Note further that the meaning “boundary stone” for *narū* A is only attested from the Middle Babylonian period on and is only indicated by usage; strictly speaking, the Akkadian word just means “stone.” Cf. MA/MB *kudurru* A, from the verb *kadāru*.

11 Including (from CAD) *idu* A, *itū* A, *limītu*, *mišru* A (in OB), *nēru* B, *pilku* A (pl. only; cf. *palāku* A, only with fields), and *pūtu*. The term *mišru* A came to designate a state border beginning in the MA/MB and increasingly into the NA/NB; in the OB, however, the word only described the edges of fields. Similarly, the verb *nabalkutu*, “to cross (over),” only came to mean crossing territorial borders in SB/MB dialects; in OB times, at most it meant to scale the wall of someone’s house. OB *pulukku* only designated a kind of tool.

12 I.e., *aḫītu* (“outside” [a city]).

13 RIME 4 3.6.6: 9’ (Ḫammurabi, the *pātu* of Gutium) and 3.7.8: 5’–6’ (Samsuiluna, *ištu pāt Gutium adi pāt Elam*).

14 Richardson 2021a: esp. 45–47 and 50–51 (quoting Scott).

have begun to change by the time of first-millennium empires, when spies, lookouts, and watchposts were more systematically employed (see Dubovský 2006). But even if Bronze Age states had intimate knowledge of hinterlands and boundaries (already doubtful), they had little ability to surveil it. We know of a few terms for scouts (e.g., *āmīru*) and safe-conduct letters; at OB Mari, we know of mobile corps of *bazaḥātū*, “border guards,” who spied on enemies and seized fugitives. Omens were used to scry unseen movements in the landscape (Richardson 2022). But no set of documents, checkpoints, or other technologies existed to make border crossing a certifiably legal (or, therefore, illegal) act. Nor was there any way to establish the identities of anyone crossing a border, should they even have been enforceable to begin with. Various accusations in early inscriptions of boundary “crossing” or “transgression” were really political accusations.

9. What references we do have to frontiers in state letters or royal inscriptions suggest that they were often one-sided projections of the city-state doing the talking. This is certainly the case when Enmetena, Ur-Namma, or Ḫammurabi talk about borders. There is almost no evidence outside of the Mari letters for the mutual recognition of state boundaries prior to MA/MB times.
10. The documentation of interstate economic activity was focused on end-point transactions rather than transit points – on what happened where people bought and sold things, not where goods passed through borderlines. We do have some evidence about such things as caravan tolls, pass-through treaties, and smuggling (especially for the Old Assyrian trade), but the focus of most commercial texts is on sites of procurement and sale – at marketplaces, not frontiers with import/export controls.
11. There was virtually no legal attention paid to borders as such; laws like Ḫammurabi’s rarely ventured to imagine let alone attempt to adjudicate anything that happened beyond the urban environment (Richardson 2021b: esp. 46–52). A few laws were concerned with foreign jurisdictions for property sales, but nothing related to borders per se.
12. Our knowledge of provincial systems *inside* of major Mesopotamian states – i.e. of their internal territorialization – is very spotty. It would be easy to assemble the positive evidence we do have for a subset of departments and officers representing them. A rather long list of men called *šagina*, *ensi*₂, *šāpiru*, *bēl pīḫāti*, etc. could be assembled for a variety of places in historical states, with an equally heterogeneous set of attested functions. But if we were to invert the exercise for the Sargonic, Ur III, Old Babylonian states, etc., and make a list of the places for which there are *no* attested governors – for powers *not* demonstrably exercised from evidence – we would arrive at a much longer list. A true inventory would show that the regulable units we sometimes imagine to make up the working insides of states are much more unattested than attested. This suggests forms of organization which were not really provincialized but made up of elite networks governing through household clientage rather than territorial authority.
13. Given the intersection of low rates of literacy and the largely textual fund of information about where places and borders were, there was an overall communicative barrier to making borders known to anyone who might cross them. Most places and borders begin by being known from only a very small number of sources, often texts beyond the access of the very people most likely to cross the lines. How were most Mesopotamians to *know* where those borders were?

This is all quite enough to make the main point, so I will stop beating a *sīsû mīti*. The arguments against the salience of frontiers are generalizing and all subject to qualification or exception; they will surprise least of all archaeologists familiar with the long and longstanding theoretical literature about territory and borders. The kinds of state boundary lines we find in our texts at most marked specific points or zones of extent, not the *shapes* of whole states; nor did they order any spaces theoretically enclosed within or between those points and zones; nor again did those boundaries express the relation of the states laying them down to the homologous shapes and territorial claims of neighboring states. Such borderlines conveyed no “calculative grasp of the material world” (to quote Stuart Elden’s elegant wording: Elden 2013: 325–327), constructing neither relations between states nor administrative legibility within them.

But what Scott would have done with these kinds of observations would not have been to stop and simply say, “See? Borders are not a useful concept,” but instead go on to ask: “What *does* the sense of all these caveats tell us about how states *were* thinking about and using geography?” If not in the ways we might expect of a state, how did territoriality work as a component of sovereign power?

There are some familiar points one could make. Yes, our evidence points to an intense focus on nodality rather than territory, networks of people and resources rather than oil-stains of controlled land. There is a real case to be made that territoriality did gradually emerge as a real infrastructural power, while notably also appearing as a concept from a very early point, long before it could be made efficacious. And there is much yet to mine on how local concerns for the borders of fields and houses *do* fall within the ambit of the political: something yet to be written about neighbors, factions, and squabbles about owned and occupied land as the actually important political questions for ancient cities.

But there is also a newer takeaway: if we take seriously the implications from nodality, clientage, and locality, what must be modeled more strenuously in future are the competing and collaborating relationships of state networks with *non*-state populations, resources, and places, quite possibly forming the majority footprint within the Mesopotamian alluvium. Early states did not merely compete and come into conflict with *each other* for finite assets but with a whole non-state sector which receded into the landscape, interacting with states on only occasional and conditional terms.

I will zoom in on point 3, about toponyms, to illustrate what I mean. Let me posit that the paradigm of few attestations for most toponyms suggests low levels of interaction between most places and the central states which give evidence for them (the vast majority of texts having been written, after all, in those cities). This hypothesis about low interactivity is a way of explaining the distribution of evidence that some Assyriologists disagree with. The sense of their objection, if I may characterize it, is that the attestation-frequency pattern mostly implies low *knowledge* on the part of modern scholars rather than low interaction in antiquity. If only we had more texts, they opine, or the right texts, we would know where these places were, what happened there, why they were important! On the contrary, I am impressed by the apparent paradox between few mentions of most places and the texts’ overall unconcern for the where-what-why. People writing cuneiform texts in virtually every case where a unique toponym is mentioned simply say “Go to X and collect my silver” (or what have you), without any expressed worries about how to pronounce the name of the town, how to get there, whether it “belonged” to the state, or whether it was dangerous to go there. We are looking at a world in which economic and administrative systems routinely interacted with places at *all* points of the sovereignty spectrum: a few places under direct control, followed by an ever-larger number of places with which they had regular, occasional, sparse, and rare interactions.¹⁵ Despite this, the atmosphere of unconcern about geographic location suggests an immense amount of casual and everyday knowledge, *grosso modo*, about where places were.

These little-mentioned places were the clients yet to be recruited, the harvests yet to be taxed, the workers yet to be levied.¹⁶ This is the “dark matter” of socio-economic life for early states, glowing like little lanterns of textualized order in a dimly lit landscape.¹⁷ The paradigm needs structured documentation and theoretical attention on the textual side, both of which are achievable goals. Yes, we should abandon romantic ideas about great and powerful ancient states, jealously guarding and ever-expanding their frontiers and control of land. But we can swap that out for admiring a managerial mindset which was endlessly sophisticated and flexible when it came to recruiting sometime-clients, calving-off rents where they could, and knowing where the places of their world were – whether they controlled them or not – Jim’s “barbarians,” with their history yet to be written.

15 One is tempted to follow the regression pattern and argue that one type of toponym would even outstrip the number of places attested only once: places never mentioned at all!

16 One hears a cynical version of the Yeats aphorism: “There are no strangers here, only friends you haven’t yet met.”

17 Richardson 2007: 21–23 with Fig. 2.1, a map inverting the traditional model of state control over productive areas, showing states to be have been discontinuous and (geographically) archipelagic entities.

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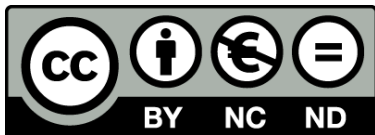
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Hidden Transcripts of the Christian Century: Power and Global Goods in Early Modern Japan

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Introduction

This essay employs James Scott’s (1990) concepts of *hidden* and *public transcripts* to explore shifting power relations during the Iberian encounter with early modern Japan. Introduced by Charles Boxer (1951), the term ‘Christian Century’ is sometimes used to refer to the dynamic period of contact between Europe and Japan between 1543 (the first recorded arrival of Europeans in Japanese waters) and 1639 (the expulsion of all Iberian merchants and missionaries from the archipelago). This was Japan’s first global moment, a time of intense cultural contact with Europe and new links with India, Southeast Asia, coastal Africa and the Americas. While the dynamism of the period makes the phrase ‘Christian Century’ inapt in certain respects, it will be used here (without scare quotes) as a convenient label.

The question of the nature of power is central to my discussion. Japanese archaeologists and premodern historians often work with a view of power which, in the terminology of Michael Mann, is both *intensive* and *authoritative*. *Intensive power* “refers to the ability to organize tightly and command a high level of mobilization or commitment from the participants”, while *authoritative power* is “actually willed by groups and institutions” comprising “definite commands and conscious obedience” (Mann 1986: 7–8). Such a view of power is arguably appropriate for the ‘absolutist’ regime of the early modern Tokugawa era (1603–1868), but can hardly be applied to the Kofun period (250–700) when an early state first appeared in the Japanese Islands. For instance, the influential proposal made by archaeologist Yukio Kobayashi in the 1950s that the distribution of a particular type of bronze mirror in the third century reflected the spread of state power now seems like a clear over-interpretation (cf. Edwards 2006). In Mann’s (1986) IEMP model of the sources of social power (ideological, economic, military and political) situated within overlapping networks, the bronze mirrors analysed by Kobayashi were a source of *ideological* power, but the extent to which they also supported *economic*, *military* and *political* power remains an open question.

Within Japanese historiography, naïve approaches to power continue to be noticeable for the Christian Century era. Both native and international scholars frequently assume power to have been both *intensive* and *authoritative* at this time. American historian James Huffman (2010: 57) describes the arrival of “hundreds of gun- and Bible-bearing Westerners who had come to make a profit and save souls”, a rendition that glosses over the complex social relations of the period. Some historians even entertain the fantasy of a potential Iberian colonisation of early modern Japan (cf. Ucerler 2022; Hudson 2024). To borrow Scott’s (1998) terminology, such arguments are a clear example of *seeing like the Japanese state*, because that state generated fear of a military and ideological threat from the Europeans to cement its own power (Paramore 2009). During the Christian Century period, it was Japan that was the most aggressive military state in East Asia, invading Korea in 1592 and 1597 (precipitating the largest sixteenth-century war anywhere in the world), conquering the Ryukyu Islands (1609), attacking Taiwan (unsuccessfully) in 1609 and 1616, and planning an invasion of Luzon – an idea that was still being entertained in 1637 (Hudson 2024). A utopian scheme for a joint Iberian-Japanese invasion of China was promoted by Spanish Jesuit Alonso Sánchez (1547–1593) but encountered strong opposition and was abandoned after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in the English Channel in 1588 (Ucerler 2022: 118–141). As I have noted elsewhere (Hudson 2024: 57), this *empresa de China* necessitates a careful reading of some Jesuit public transcripts. Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) warned against any invasion of Japan, not only because the Japanese were militarily so strong, but also because “the land is the most barren and poor that I have ever seen” (Ucerler 2022: 119). The latter comment stands in stark contrast to other European accounts which stress the fertility of the land and (by implication) its potential for conversions.

Iberian and other European (English and Dutch) operations in Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were centred on seaborne trade managed from small coastal enclaves, a pattern that characterised other European colonial activities in Eurasia and Africa at the time (Darwin 2007; Roy 2025). As a result, the power wielded by Europeans in Japan was (again, in Mann’s terminology) *diffused*. Diffused power spreads in a “spontaneous, unconscious, decentered way throughout a population, resulting in similar social practices that embody power relations but are not explicitly commanded” (Mann 1986: 8). The power of the Catholic Church and especially the Society of Jesus in Japan might be regarded as *intensive* over its European members, who were controlled from Rome and by the Church in Goa, but more *extensive* within the world of Japanese converts. At a time of enormous historical change in both Japan and the world, one size did not fit all.

Japan’s Christian Century was a period of state-building through war. It also marked a shift from a decentralised, mercantilist society to one based on ‘agrarian fundamentalism’ (Amino 2012). Like the Nichiren and True Pure Land schools of Buddhism, Christianity in sixteenth-century Japan can be considered as a religion linked with seafaring and urban-based merchants (Amino 2012: 100–102). The iconoclastic medievalist Yoshihiko Amino (1928–2004) was in certain respects a Japanese James Scott. Although the dominant, *seeing like a state* view of historiography has emphasised Japan as an agrarian nation, Amino explored the archipelago’s *barbarian* (*sensu* Scott) past. What Scott (2017) termed the ‘Golden Age of the Barbarians’ lasted in Japan until the early seventeenth century when the Tokugawa shoguns finally managed to establish a secure ‘grain state’. More precise dates for the end of what I have termed the ‘barbarian niche’ (Hudson 2022) in the Japanese Islands can be linked with Japan’s 1609 invasion of the Ryukyu kingdom (which had been a major medieval trading state), the 1637–38 Shimabara peasant revolt (which took on a Christian aspect), and the 1669–72 Shakushain war of the Indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido against the Japanese.

Given this dynamic background of shifting power relations, Scott (1990) provides us with a language to discuss the manifold ways in which domination and resistance were expressed (or hidden) in the lived experiences of people in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Japan. In my view this provides an important antidote to the rigid approaches that command the literature. For some Japanese, Christianity had a strong spiritual appeal, in part because it seemed to provide a way to resist dominant structures of political and patriarchal power. Many female converts were likely attracted to Christianity in opposition to Buddhist teachings that, due to menstruation and childbirth, they would be condemned to a ‘Lake of Blood’ after death, with little hope of salvation (Ward 2009). Over 300,000 Japanese are thought to have converted to Christianity during a period of a few decades. Many of these converts had little choice but to follow the lords of their domains, although in private there was no doubt a range of opinions between support and opposition. Other Japanese embraced the new faith in a fervent way. One example here comes from Jesuit descriptions of a Corpus Christi procession in Nagasaki in 1614:

“Some walked dressed in the same hempen rice bags tied up with many ropes as they had heard had been the punishment of the Christians elsewhere in Japan. Other went about as if crucified, carrying large crosses [...]. Again others carried muskets that had been lashed to their legs so tightly that it looked like the barrels had penetrated their flesh.... [Others had their naked] torsos wrapped in thorny vines [...]. Others used oyster shells strung tightly together [...] and suffered great pains in this way. [...] There was one man who carried two entangled snakes over his naked flesh that would bite him from time to time [...].” (Hesselink 2016: 148)

This remarkable procession is not simply a case of Japanese believers following practices that had ‘diffused’ from Counter-Reformation Europe. It was, above all, a performance of resistance against the Tokugawa regime wherein the violence of the procession comments publicly – yet in a way perhaps hidden or ambiguous to non-Christians – on the violence of the state. The re-purposing of weapons of persecution into acts of resistance gives a new nuance to the phrase ‘weapons of the weak’ (cf. Scott 1985).

Materiality, Display and ‘Global Goods’

Both archaeology and history have taken a ‘material turn’ in recent years (e.g., Gosden and Marshall 1999; Gosden 2005; Joyce 2012; Aram and Yun-Casalilla 2014; Gerritsen and Riello 2016; Richardson et al. 2016). Morgan Pitelka (2016) has discussed the role of the accumulation, exchange and display of *meibutsu* (famous objects) in the establishment of the Tokugawa regime. Timon Screech (2020) looks at the role of European objects,

trade and gift-giving during the same period. Even if they did not convert to Christianity themselves, Japanese élites used the ‘global goods’ brought by Europeans in political theatres of accumulation and display. In fact, fascination with such global goods seems to have been widely shared – albeit no doubt in different ways – across Japanese society. A 1594 letter by Francisco Pasio explained that:

“[The warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi] has become so enamoured of Portuguese dress and costume that he and his retainers frequently wear this apparel, as do all the other lords of Japan, even the gentiles, with rosaries of driftwood on the breast [...] and with a crucifix at their side [...]; some of them are so curious that they learn by rote the litanies of *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria* and go along praying in the streets, not in mockery or scorn [...] but simply for gallantry, or because they think it is a good thing and one which will help them to achieve prosperity in worldly things.” (Boxer 1951: 207–208)

Late medieval Christianity had developed a strongly material aspect (Bynum 2020), and this also influenced Japan.

In his article “What do objects want?”, archaeologist Chris Gosden (2005) has discussed how things can lay down certain ‘rules’ or ‘trajectories’ of use. The Christian Century provides numerous examples of this process. One fascinating case is recorded by John Saris (c. 1580–1643), captain of the first English ship to reach Japan. Saris had purchased a painting of Venus for his cabin and noted in his official diary that it was “somewhat wantonlie”. Upon arriving in Japan in 1613, Saris gave a tour of his ship for local ladies “of the better sort” who, mistaking Venus for the Virgin Mary, began to “worship” the painting, even though they were not Christians themselves (Screech 2020: 134). In the meeting of very different cultures, the material provided points of familiarity to negotiate the encounters. Catholic and Buddhist rosaries, for example, were outwardly rather similar, and the Virgin Mary became linked with the Kannon bodhisattva, the ‘goddess of mercy’. Jesuit João Rodrigues’ (c. 1561–1633) *Historia da Igreja do Japão* revels in deep details about the materiality of Japanese life, providing an account that is at once strange yet familiar (Cooper 2001).

The familiarity of some material objects could also, however, hide complexities, contradictions and resistance. Even new food crops might encounter resistance, for both economic and symbolic reasons (e.g., Levi 2014; Pelloli 2023; Findley and Roberts 2024). All artefacts can be said to have a range of performers and audiences. Sometimes the object provides or attempts to provide a “self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (Scott 1990: 18). In other cases, the object is more evasive; it may not be hidden itself but its meanings are fluid and potentially incorporate readings linked to hidden transcripts. An example is provided by Izumo no Okuni (c. 1578–c. 1613), a female performer who is said to have begun the *kabuki* style of theatre in Japan. A painting of Okuni now in the Tokugawa Art Museum shows her dressed as a samurai with a rosary and crucifix around her neck (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Izumo_no_Okuni). Is the painting a critique of the shallow ‘cosplay’ of contemporary samurai, or does it depict an ‘authentic’ Christian retainer? From an initial openness, indeed embrace, of such ambiguities, in the early seventeenth century the Tokugawa regime began to see Christianity as an ideological threat to its dominance (Elison 1973; Paramore 2009). In a sense, the regime began to concern itself with the hidden transcripts of the Christian Century. Christian decorative art, previously used by a range of people and classes in Japan became a means to enforce anti-Christian regulations. In the late sixteenth century, devotional metal medallions became an important element in Counter-Reformation practices (Riordan 2015). Numerous such medallions have been discovered in Japan, often as grave goods (Gotō 2023). From the late 1620s, the Tokugawa Inquisition (*shūmon aratame yaku*) began to use these medallions and other images in *e-fumi* displays of obedience whereby people were forced to stamp on devotional objects to demonstrate their rejection of Christianity (see below).

Jesuit Casuistry: Public Deliberations on Hidden Transcripts

Jesuit writings from Japan’s Christian Century provide us with fascinating material to consider the issue of the relations of power discussed in Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. In sixteenth-century Japan, Christian teachings were potentially revolutionary; yet the Society of Jesus was essentially opposed to a major *social* transformation. Spanish Jesuit Pedro Gómez (1533–1600) explained this clearly in a 1595 work written in Latin and Japanese:

“[...] even if a Christian’s lord is a pagan, one should obey him with regard to most things. [...] In Matthew 22 we read: *Reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris, Caesari* [‘Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s’]. [...] Everyone is thus obliged to obey one’s superiors. The reason is that the purpose of the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, was not to abolish the natural law [...] but to bring it to completion.” (Ucerler 2022: 52)

There were, however, exceptions to this obligation, expounded through the Jesuit method of *casuistry* – the moral theology of individual cases (*casus*) – which was designed to provide ‘solutions’ to moral dilemmas (Friedrich 2022: 173–184). In England and other Protestant countries, casuistry became notorious as a way to hide the truth through ‘equivocation’, considered as little more than deception. John King, Bishop of London from 1611–21, condemned the Jesuits as “changelings, chameleons [...] ambiguous in their answers [...] with their meandering turnings and windings, their mental reservations, their amphibolous, amphibious prepositions, which live, as these creatures, part in the land, part in the water” (Screech 2020: 192). In Scott’s terms, we might say that Jesuit casuistry was thought to undermine the ‘official’ distinction between public and hidden, thus posing a perceived danger to the social order.

Japanese ‘public transcripts’ of the sixteenth century said little about the social or theological aspects of the encounter with Europe, especially as it affected the broader population of the archipelago. By contrast, Jesuit records afford invaluable materials to understand *both* the public transcript of how the Church saw the relationship between secular rulers and their subordinates *and* hidden-transcript insights into how converts attempted to negotiate the demands of their new faith with requirements imposed by non-Christian lords. Ucerler (2022) has discussed at length a section in Gómez’s 1595 text structured in question-and-answer format. Gómez built on principles dating back to Aquinas’ thirteenth-century *Summa theologiae* but his approach differed from contemporary decisions by the Church in Goa (from where the Japanese mission was administered), which rejected any authority by ‘pagans’ over the faithful and tried to restrict contact between the two groups (Ucerler 2022: 55). In Gómez’s explanation, “acts that are neither good nor bad, i.e. those that are of an ‘indifferent’ nature, are admissible.” This meant that making Shinto or Buddhist images or constructing temples was forbidden, but “cutting wood or transporting stones for these purposes is not in itself a sin.” Participation in various Japanese festivals was accepted (“To perform dances is not forbidden at all”), but the point was not to acknowledge that the ritual would accrue any religious benefits (Ucerler 2022: 52, 57). As the Tokugawa persecution of Christianity gained force, Japanese believers were instructed that “it was not sinful to deny Christ if professing Him would cause the death of a Christian (including oneself), and neither was it sinful to conceal rosaries, images, or other ‘meritorious objects’ (*kuriki no mono*)” (Screech 2020: 193). All transcripts of Christian belief were now forced into hiding.

Hidden Transcripts of the Crypto-Christian Era: *e-fumi* and Burials

After extensive persecutions in the early seventeenth century, Christianity in Japan went underground (Elison 1973). Communities of crypto-Christians continued to maintain their faith in several locations until the late nineteenth century when the ban on Christianity was lifted (Turnbull 1998). Sites related to crypto-Christians in north-west Kyushu were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage in 2018 (Delakorda Kawashima 2021). This section will briefly introduce two contrasting hidden transcripts of this period: burials and the *e-fumi* ceremonies whereby Christians were forced to publicly renounce their faith.

The term *e-fumi* means ‘stepping upon an image’ and refers to the procedure introduced by the Tokugawa regime whereby Japanese people were required to put their feet on Christian images – most frequently of Jesus or Mary – in order to demonstrate their rejection or indifference to that faith.¹ The images used were initially paper pictures that had been confiscated from the printing press established in Kyushu by the Society of Jesus; wood and copper images were later produced especially for the purpose (Hesselink 2016: 212), though paper prints continued to be made throughout the nineteenth century (Montanari et al. 2025). First introduced in 1629, *e-fumi* was but one of many measures through which the Tokugawa regime attempted to eradicate Christianity from Japan. It was a highly symbolic attempt to inscribe rejection of the faith into the public transcript. Historians have noted that the

1 Although often conflated, the terms *e-fumi* and *fumi-e* can be distinguished as process and object. *E-fumi* refers to the ceremony of trampling on the image whereas *fumi-e* denotes the image itself.

‘mental reservation’ of Jesuit casuistry undermined this measure in a fundamental way – and “The alternative was to be killed” (Screech 2020: 193). Yet Japanese believers also adopted their own symbolic ‘reservations’ or resistance. The *e-fumi* ceremony required that shoes – in practice straw sandals – be worn while stamping on the image since the failure to remove footwear was itself a type of defilement in Japanese culture. After the ceremony, some groups of crypto-Christians on Fukue Island (Nagasaki) would first burn the sandals, then mix the ashes with water in a bowl and drink the mixture in penitence (Whelan 1996: 134).

As there are relatively few written texts relating to the crypto-Christians of Japan, research on those communities has often taken an ethnographic approach (Whelan 1996; Turnbull 1998). Archaeology provides another perspective and the field of *Kirishitan kōkōgaku* (‘Christian archaeology’) has a long history in Japan, dating back to the early years of the twentieth century with surveys of gravestones in Kyushu from around 1902 (Tanaka 2023). Beginning in 1917, Kyoto University’s Department of Archaeology carried out more systematic investigations, which were published with long English summaries (Hamada and Umehara 1923; Shimmura 1923; Shimmura and Hamada 1923).² ‘Christian archaeology’ in Japan has remained almost totally separate from ‘mission archaeology’ as practiced in the Americas and from new work on the global archaeology of Iberian colonialism (cf. Graham 1998; Montón-Subías et al. 2016). In her review of the former approach, Elizabeth Graham (1998) stressed the novelty of employing archaeology to explore the role of Christian missions and missionaries beyond Europe. Although she explicitly limited that new field to the Americas, Graham noted the important potential of archaeology in understanding “changing cultural imagination and reordering of a conceptual universe.” From the perspective of Japanese research on the Christian Century, Graham (1998: 29) makes the interesting point that views which emphasise Christianity as a “religion of the state” encourage the assumption that “pre-Columbian elements in religious material culture [were] resistance phenomena”. This resonates closely with influential opinions in Japanese historiography that Christianity existed in a single ‘authentic’ form which Japan lacked. ‘Folk’ responses to Christianity meant Japan did not produce “full-fledged European-style Christians” (Higashibaba 2001: xv) or that “the Christianity prevalent in Japan during this period should not be regarded as true ‘Christianity’ but as a unique Japanese religion called ‘Kirishitan’” (Oka 2021: 1) – *Kirishitan* being a Japanese word derived from the Portuguese *Cristão*. The term *Kirishitan* does, however, develop some resonance by the late nineteenth century since, by that time, some crypto-Christians had come to regard their faith as differing significantly from European Catholicism (Whelan 1996: 133).

The question of interaction between native and Christian beliefs is an important one in both Japan and other parts of the world. Robert Ricard (1966: 278) had already noted that many native ‘superstitions’ found in the Americas were in fact European in origin, a point made for Japan by Turnbull (1998). Based on earlier observations by Royall Tyler (1993), I recently discussed the possibility of Christian influence on folk beliefs related to Mount Fuji (Hudson 2024: 35–37). Although medieval Europe had a long tradition of heart burials, at least amongst the aristocracy (Weiss-Krejci 2010), Alice Kehoe (1979) made the suggestion that beliefs about the Sacred Heart were influenced by native Mexican iconography. We can thus agree with Graham’s (1998: 29) insistence that “Archaeologists must be careful not to adopt the simplistic approach of colonial Catholic priests and interpret the material culture of mission sites as manifestations of either acceptance or rejection of Christianity.” European missionaries quickly realised that Japan possessed a civilisation that was in many ways as complex as that of Europe; how they attempted to propagate their faith in that context was anything but ‘simplistic’ (Ucerler 2022).

European visitors to Japan in the Christian Century made surprisingly few comments about burials and mortuary customs (Moriwaki 2023). João Rodrigues (1561/2–1633/4) left exhaustive descriptions about numerous aspects of Japanese society and history but had almost nothing to say about funerals (Cooper 2001). In a 1585 work usually known as the *Tratado* (‘treatise’), Luís Fróis (1532–1597) noted four differences in the burial customs of Japan as compared to Europe. First, “[o]ur deceased depart with their hair as it is when they die; in Japan the deceased (both men and women) must go with their heads entirely shaved.” Second, “[o]ur caskets [i.e. coffins] are elongated; theirs are round, that is, in the form of a half-barrel.” Third, “[o]ur deceased are buried face up in a reclining position; theirs are seated and bound with their face between their knees.” Finally, “[w]e bury our dead; the Japanese generally cremate theirs” (Danford et al. 2014: 120). Fróis’ text was likely compiled as a guide to Japanese

2 This research was re-published as a book with the English title *Studies on the Christian Relics in Japan* by Tōkō Shoin, Tokyo in 1926. Citations here follow the romanisation of names in the original. The files can be downloaded from: <https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/handle/2433/180759>.

culture for Jesuit missionaries. His comments apply especially to the aristocracy and warrior class; in general, there was considerable diversity in burial customs in early modern Japan (Tanigawa 1992; Suzuki et al. 2014).

Fróis’ *Historia de Japam* described a lavish funeral for an important Japanese Christian. The body was wrapped in golden damask fabric. A procession consisting of a hundred Christians, each with a lit candle, was led by a gilt gold and silver calvary (a cross with encrusted skull and bones) and followed by twelve white silk flags bearing insignia of the Passion. Moriwaki (2023: 36) suggests that the use of the flags may have been inspired by Buddhist or military-style vertical flags of the period. According to Fróis (1981: 336–337), this elaborate burial “caused many Gentiles to become Christians, as they later did.”

As seen from archaeology, the main features of the Christian mortuary style adopted in Japan were rectangular burial pits, headstones inscribed with Christian symbols such as crosses or the Christogram IHS, and grave goods such as crucifixes, rosary beads and devotional medallions (see Hudson 2024: 25–26). Although grave goods are relatively rare in practice (Gotō 2023), the Christian mortuary style was adopted quickly and widely, with the earliest dated headstone from 1581. In the context of the present essay, it is especially interesting that these mortuary customs were continued in some areas *after* the prohibition on Christianity. Northwest Kyushu remains the best-known region in this respect (Ōishi 2023). Endō (2023) has summarised evidence from the Tohoku region of northeast Honshu. Excavations at the Nihongi site in Ōshū city, Iwate prefecture uncovered 15 graves from the early modern period. Grave SK14 produced remains of a seated, barrel-like coffin together with a number of grave goods. Though heavily encrusted on the surface, a small metal object (1.7 x 1.0 x 0.2 cm in size) appears to be a Catholic medallion. The presence of this probable medallion in turn suggests that the 54 glass beads from the burial came from a rosary. Other grave goods included pieces of a pipe and 11 coins. The coins date the burial to the eighteenth century or later (Endō 2023: 89–90), long after Christianity had been banned in Japan.

Concluding Comments

This essay has sketched, in a provisional fashion, a few ideas for future research based on Scott (1990). For me, discovering the rich debates in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* has nevertheless been an exciting journey. I had previously paid greater attention to Scott’s more archaeological and anthropological writings, especially *Against the Grain* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*, works that Scott (2024: 5) himself categorised as “leaps into the abyss.” Many archaeological studies of early modern European colonialism have contrasted European ‘domination’ with native ‘resistance’ (e.g., Panich and Schneider 2015). My recent book on Japan’s Christian Century (Hudson 2024) is not the first to argue that this framework needs careful nuancing in the Japanese context. Scott’s concepts of public and hidden transcripts provide one productive approach to this question – and indeed to other periods of Japanese history. Reading the work of James Scott is always stimulating and quickly suggests new research projects and framings. Although several of Scott’s works have been translated into Japanese, as far as I am aware *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is not one of them. Yet in my view the book offers enormous potential for critical analyses of the archaeology and history of Japan. The public/hidden transcript framing would, I believe, provide new angles on a range of diverse topics in Japanese history from the decorative tombs of Late Antiquity (Zancan 2023) to the vexed question of premodern meat consumption (Hudson and Muñoz Fernández 2023) to peasant revolts (Vlastos 1986). Excavating the hidden transcripts of Japanese history is a compelling task for future research.

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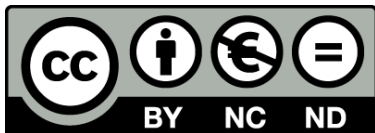
A Southeast Asian Archaeologist’s Perspective on James Scott’s Contributions to the Field

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A Southeast Asian Archaeologist’s Perspective on James Scott’s Contributions to the Field

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More than an entire archaeological generation has passed since “post-processual” critiques up-ended the world of archaeological theory, and we now travel through a rich and varied theoretical landscape that draws inspiration from scholarship from the natural sciences to the humanities. Our collective obsession with new methodologies still threatens to overwhelm our interpretive frameworks, as advances in science, geomatics, and AI offer ever more precise tools for data recovery and analysis. Against this backdrop, and with metrics looming ever larger as the primary criterion of intellectual success, it is perhaps not surprising how few archaeologists today read the source literature from which we draw our dominant theoretical frameworks. Like their predecessors a generation ago, most archaeologists still engage in the mining-and-bridging strategy that Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt (1993: 3) described during the peak of the post-processual era: grab a current approach from the social sciences or humanities and cobble it into archaeological shape, without fully understanding the source field from which it originated. Few archaeologists today cite Immanuel Wallerstein when they invoke some revisionist world-systems model, and still fewer mention Benedict Anderson when discussing variations on imagined communities. We are not unique among scholars in doing this, as such ideas become deeply embedded in our interpretive world. Yet understanding how this intellectual current shape-shifts as it wafts across the field of archaeology requires returning to its source. James Scott has been a more important contributor to these currents of the last several decades than I suspect most archaeologists recognize.

Contributors to this issue have been asked to consider how James C. Scott’s work has influenced the field and also our scholarship. As a Southeast Asian archaeologist who studies ancient states, I have been particularly drawn to James Scott’s scholarship on power relations and the state. Surprisingly, relatively few archaeological colleagues outside of historical archaeology engaged with his work before his 2017 publication, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. This publication both represented conventional archaeological thought to the public and drew ample and occasionally heated responses from archaeologists (e.g., Campbell 2019; Stark 2019a). Scott’s work has, however, also impacted archaeological interpretation for several decades, both indirectly (through our adoption of methodologies based on his conceptual framework) and – more rarely – directly through archaeologists’ use of his theoretical constructs.

My goal in this essay is to highlight elements of his research program that align with archaeological research themes and review some examples of his influence in the field and my research program. Despite my most earnest efforts, readers will surely find gaps in my citation of archaeological works for which I apologize in advance. I will also explore other elements of James Scott’s work that could enrich archaeological interpretation if we paid more attention to them.

Elements of James Scott’s Research that Align with Archaeological Themes

James Scott was a social scientist whose scholarship on Malaysia and Burma/Myanmar crossed multiple disciplinary lines to understand agrarian studies and peasant societies. His PhD in political science analyzed Malaysian civil servants in an emerging post-colonial state. Following the publication of several books – and (he notes) in response to the Vietnam War movement – he turned his attention to peasant studies, where two years

of ethnographic fieldwork among Malaysian rice farmers provided him with material for more than half a dozen subsequent books. Each has developed a specific premise that argued against the efficacy of centralized state power, Marxist or otherwise, about hegemony and resistance, offering provocative insights at an increasingly broader scale. The same macro lens and taste for master narrative that has drawn collegial ire in some circles (e.g., Lieberman 2010; Aung-Thwin 2011; D’Altroy 2019) or at least disquiet in others (e.g., Pollock 2019: 705) has also wrought significant global impact: more than 32,000 publications have cited his *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* alone. Citations to his work appear in research as distant from anthropology as the financialization of housing, urban informality, and the constitution of postgenomic life. Myriad obituaries and memorials attest to his scholarly corpus’s impact on interpretive social science in the study of agrarian societies, but I contend in this article that Jim Scott’s work has influenced archaeological interpretation in ways that may not be immediately recognizable to our community of practice.

It is James Scott’s foray into ethnographically-tinged agrarian studies that holds the greatest potential for archaeologists, both because so many of us seek to understand power relations and the state and because so many archaeologists study agrarian societies. Scott’s work is ready-made for archaeology because of his insistence that power relations are “firmly anchored in material practices” (Scott 1990: 188) and because so much of what we study – from people’s latrines, their trash dumps, and their abandoned houses – offers insights on what people did, not what they said or wrote. His materialist focus and interest in the tensions created from efforts at state domination and bottom-up resistance and in the kinds of subversive techniques that people employ (which he termed “everyday forms of resistance”) offer interpretive scaffolding to archaeologists who study power relations using the archaeological record. We cannot directly identify the acts of resistance that Scott describes using ethnographic and documentary records – poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging, disloyalty, slander, theft, or sabotage (e.g., Thurston 2007: 274) – but we can track the emergence of discrete groups that may have acted against the state. We can also study efforts by ancient states to bolster elite control through simplification and standardization, even when these same measures often produce instability and impel resistance (Yoffee 2019: 2).

Much of James Scott’s work concentrated on the historical development of institutionalized modern state power and domination, and at least five of his books are considered broadly influential in understanding state development (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990, 1998, 2017). Scott was particularly interested in how subordinate groups resisted power more frequently through covert than through public acts of resistance. His two-year ethnographic sojourn among Malay farmers gave him insights into life under direct state hegemony where people could not organize openly. Within this setting, he observed community members collaborating regularly to resist state directives through what he called “infra politics” that created “hidden transcripts” that actively resisted state mandates (1990). Such actions, undertaken with a tacit conspiracy of silence toward the authorities, were far more common than public revolts but still had a kind of agency that, under some circumstances, generated social change.

Scott uses the concept of “legibility” to describe the process of institutionalizing the means to extract labor, goods, and services from a subject population through bureaucracy and personal domination, including serfdom and slavery (1998). Historically documented and contemporary states inscribed their power on populations through censuses, taxes, enslavement, conscription, resettlement, roads, and environmental reconfiguration, such as re-routing waterways. Such legibility brought benefits to elite citizens (and notably literacy) while providing the state with the tools to track and conscript its citizens.

Scott’s Southeast Asian expertise led him to explore the politics surrounding the retreat from state power (2009). He began his area studies in Burma, home to both lowland populations involved in intensive rice cultivation and upland Indigenous groups. These upland regions, labeled as Zomia (as discussed in Michaud 2010) or as the Dong World (Anderson and Whitmore 2015), were inhabited by numerous large populations who practiced swidden agriculture. Their lands spanned contemporary southern and southwestern China and northern Southeast Asia, allowing these populations to move seamlessly across a vast montane region. Drawing from the work of earlier ethnographers and historians, Scott viewed these upland groups as refugees from lowland state systems. He argued that subsistence choices within these state systems could be politically motivated rather than merely environmentally constrained. Some groups chose to escape the state by relocating to non-state spaces, which in Southeast Asia were primarily upland areas but could also include other environmental settings, such as swamps, marshes, and oceans. Scott contended that both governed (state) and ungoverned (nonstate or extra-state) spaces developed alongside each other throughout history.

Archaeologists are likely more comfortable with his generalist-comparative monograph, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, than with any of his other books because of its subject matter, which reflects close consultation with Mesopotamian specialists before writing the volume. Some of us might laud him for his unusually faithful reflections of archaeological interpretations in his specific case studies, particularly in contrast with other “public intellectuals” who have written about archaeology. One might, however, conclude that this 2017 publication is the least useful of all his works for archaeological theory precisely because he has reflected what we consider common knowledge effectively, rather than offering new ideas for archaeologists to apply to their case studies. There is no question that his previous works offer far more insights for interpreting the archaeological record for scholars like me, and the following section suggests that I am not alone in this belief.

How Archaeologists Have Used James Scott’s Ideas

Any social scientist might argue that Scott’s focus on domination and resistance in multiple forms aligns with work by archaeologists of many stripes, but it is primarily historical archaeologists and archaeologists who study state-level societies who have used some of his concepts directly, particularly in contexts of contact and colonialism (but see Singh and Glowacki 2022 for a late Pleistocene exception). His framework of private/public transcripts has been particularly fruitful for historical archaeologists, while both historical archaeologists and those who study ancient states have benefited from his focus on the emergence and maintenance of non-state spaces by subalterns. At the broadest level, archaeologists have focused on how documentary records offer evidence of resistance to colonial demands as in the 18th–19th century Outer Hebrides (Symonds 1999) or in skaldic/court poems and public documents crafted by the medieval elite of southern Scandinavia (Thurston 2007). A growing number of practitioners have also operationalized Scott’s concepts using archaeological evidence.

One clear example of this lies in using material culture as two kinds of texts or, in Scott’s terminology, transcripts. Using this approach, hidden transcripts counterbalance the documentary records produced by the state and can include the maintenance and even development of locally manufactured goods despite state pressure to acculturate. Where public transcripts can include architecture and even church seating in European colonies (Hall 2000: 31), hidden transcripts in the archaeological record may involve private spaces and their material contents in plantations (Ruppel et al. 2003), sloppily-decorated ceramics among colonial Pueblo societies (Spielmann et al. 2006), 17th-century clay pipes in Ireland (Hartnett 2004). Subjugated populations may be innovative by manufacturing new local ceramic wares (Zeitlin 2015) or continue to use traditional ceramics in the face of colonization, such as large steatite *ollas* (jars) and *comals* (griddles) among post-contact Chumash communities (Gamble 2015). Sixteenth-century local Irish chieftains assumed some trappings of their English overlords but continued to include tower houses based on traditional spatial grammars (Delle 1999).

Another concept that Scott introduced in describing forms of resistance might be termed “escape agriculture” (e.g., Walker 2022), a pattern that archaeologists can sometimes trace on physical landscapes. Distinguishing state vs. non-state/extra-state spaces has thus provided historical archaeologists with more useful tools. Some regions like the Great Dismal Swamp (Sayers 2014), large wetlands that straddle southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, were non-state spaces that offered refuge to self-emancipated Black and displaced Native peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries. Others were multicultural early 19th-century Maroon communities in the United States, as in Angola (Baram 2012). But archaeologists also suggest that 18th century enslaved people in Narragansett (Rhode Island) crafted their own non-state spaces, from houses owned by free blacks to wooded areas that were used as gathering places to maintain African cultural traditions like storytelling, dance, and ritual (Fitts 1996: 64). The Ifugao Archaeological Project’s focus on this Philippine uplands region as a colonial refugium from Spanish domination efforts (Acabado 2018) is the only published Southeast Asian historical archaeological application of Scott’s (2009) work – and draws direct parallels to the pattern he describes in mainland Southeast Asia to this island setting to the south.

James Scott’s work has also contributed substantially to the broad intellectual currents that swirl around our fields, perhaps nowhere else so clearly as in the analytical scale and theoretical focus of archaeological research. Archaeologists’ relatively recent embrace of “bottom-up” perspectives for understanding culture change includes

theoretical approaches like the “collective action” theory that draws from Scott’s work (e.g., DeMarrais and Earle 2017) and applications to agrarian societies in ancient states (Erickson 2006: 348; Nichols 2015). Scott’s focus on individual actors and small-scale interactions has also permeated our methodological focus, as practitioners of household archaeology credit him as one proponent of the microscalar approach (e.g., Robin 2003; Robin et al. 2014). Increasing numbers of archaeologists working on state-level societies who wish to challenge conventional Marxist interpretations cite Scott’s work in studies of resistance in particular case studies of specific shatter zones (González-Ruibal 2014, drawing from Scott 2009) and more broadly to understand changing power relations in the archaeology of empire (Düring et al. 2020; see also Rosenzweig and Marston 2018: 90–91 for a recent review).

Although archaeologists who seek to understand the development of social stratification may learn new details as much from Scott’s (2017) *Against the Grain* monograph, more of them benefit from his research on the nature and durability of state infrastructures and infrastructural power (Yoffee 2016). He specifically contended that early states were fragile, with limited control, and questioned the effective power of more recent (and perhaps even contemporary) states to effect change. Although relatively few colleagues have embraced Scott’s anarchism full-throatedly (but see Angelbeck and Grier 2012), his work has played some part in the emerging archaeological interest in anarchism (e.g., Flexner and Gonzalez-Tennant 2018; Furholt et al. 2020). Whether couched in anarchist terms or offered as a case study, James Scott’s work consistently illustrates the potential power of the bottom and the decidedly limited power of the top. This career-long sustained exploration into the contingent and fragile nature of institutional power, which must routinely negotiate resistance from agents within and beyond the polity, is perhaps the most useful scholarship for archaeologists who study ancient states.

Scott’s (1998) central contention – that states seek power over their subordinates through simplification to make them “legible” – is one of his key theoretical contributions to archaeological theory: not because he is alone in suggesting this, but because he steps away from purely Marxist models in his framework. Drawing from Michael Mann’s analysis of power, scholars agree that ancient states and empires depended on collaboration with local elites to naturalize power relations through strategies like inverting traditions and historical forgetting (Richardson 2016). So the very process of simplification or bureaucratization that made citizenry visible to the state also produced bottom-up resistance and infrastructural fragility (Pollock 2019: 704; Yoffee 2016, 2019: 2): generating complex and nonlinear histories of long-lived ‘civilizations’ characterized by the collapse and regeneration of a variety of early states, many of which were too weak to exercise effective power (Schwartz and Nichols 2006).

Excepting the previously mentioned Ifugao research on post-colonial “escape agriculture” and my work on the fragility of Angkorian states (Stark 2019b), few Southeast Asian archaeologists have used Scott’s concepts to explain our archaeological patterning. One might, with some stretching, consider including Matthew Spriggs’ Lapita case study (Furholt et al. 2020), which views the Remote Pacific as a kind of Zomia from Southeast Asia. What are we to make of this relative absence of James Scott from the archaeological literature of his source area? The fact that his work resonates most strongly with historical (rather than “prehistoric”) archaeologists globally partly explains this absence, since few Southeast Asian archaeologists engage in historical archaeology as defined in the West. A growing handful of archaeologists work in Southeast Asia’s earliest literate societies, but these predated Western contact by more than 1400 years and align more closely with South Asia’s Early Historic period (Stark 2014). Remarkably few Southeast Asian archaeologists research post-16th century occupations (outside of “shipwreck archaeology”), where little theoretical work has developed, because most practitioners work in heritage management with limited opportunity to publish. Those who do are constrained by historiographic paradigms like royal chronicles that restrict interpretation in ways that resemble Chinese archaeological research (von Falkenhausen 1993). Western-originating historical archaeological concerns with contact and colonialism, therefore, have little resonance in Southeast Asian archaeological practice beyond the Philippines research noted previously (see Acabado and Hsieh 2020).

Another reason for this “Scott silence” in the archaeology of the very region where he worked might lie in the hegemony of Western paradigms in Southeast Asian archaeological research, producing a long-term focus on “prehistoric” rather than historic research (in which state dynamics can be studied). One might blame the region’s spectacular early hominin finds as much as foreign researchers’ embrace of Anglo-European conceptual frameworks, using Thailand as the basis for offering generalizations for regional developments (Shoocongdej 2011, 2017). Resistance to these culture history paradigms (which draw largely from now-disputed European models based on historical linguistics) has come both from the region’s archaeologists (Kanjanaajuntorn 2020) and from a small band of anthropological

archaeologists working in the region (e.g., Stark 2015; White 2017) for different but overlapping reasons that intersect over the need to view Southeast Asia’s archaeological record on its own terms. Both Southeast Asian and foreign critiques of a Three Age system emanate not simply from a concern to decolonize the field, but also from an increasingly robust archaeological record that does not parallel trends found in the Western hemisphere. The field is changing rapidly as more Southeast Asians move into researching their past, and one change is in the number of scholars studying the region’s ancient “historic” states in both the lowland and upland regions. Such work might well attract interest in Scott’s concepts and provide his ideas with more historical depth.

James Scott’s Contributions to Archaeological Thought

Jim Scott’s ideas have permeated the public conversation and also archaeological discourse and affected both how scholars and the public talk and think about the past. This is clearest, of course, in his 2017 *Against the Grain* monograph. Throughout his career, however, he made an explicit commitment to making his key ideas accessible to a wider audience rather than remaining in the ivory tower to converse with different theorists (Gilman et al. 2014: 117). It was certainly his willingness to generalize about long-term social and political processes – which he chalked up to his positivist beginnings – that formed such a powerful tool for reaching an educated audience across the social sciences and humanities. That this same tendency frustrated many of his colleagues is clear from one prominent scholar’s query, in a review of Scott’s (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed*, “But how far is it real, and how far does it hang together?” (Brookfield 2011: 491).

Like many archaeologists, James Scott appreciated the need for generalizing models. He concentrated on broad similarities, despite critiques from his peers that his broad brush ran “roughshod over differences and specific conditions that others would consider essential” (Scott 1990: 22). Scott’s effort to understand peasant societies was grounded in a fundamental objection to state forms that oppressed the individual and founded in the microscale of ethnography. His work has helped humanize the present and the past as a virtual palimpsest of everyday acts: not some Marxist historical dialectic of proletariat vs. bourgeoisie, but instead of farmers and merchants, artisans and individuals across the social spectrum. These agents did not engage consciously in class struggle and rarely resisted in public, but they regularly took steps to assert their will in the world and occasionally electrified the collective to create meaningful change. James Scott was a self-avowed anarchist who dedicated his *Domination and Arts of Resistance* (1990) to the Moorestown Friends’ (Quaker) School that he attended as a youth. Some observers have characterized his work as “in the end, deeply romantic” (McClellan 2024), and archaeologists such as Tim Denham (2018: 265) have used his approach to argue for the resilience of small-scale community-based polities that required no overarching state to function.

James Scott was also, finally, a humanist who liked talking with and learning about people. He may not have agreed to interact with Southeast Asian colleagues who critiqued his (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed Book* in print (Dove 2011), but he was pleased to engage with archaeologists when the opportunity presented itself. Let me close with two personal examples. The first was the 2017 Getty Museum conference on State Fragility (that produced the Yoffee 2019 volume), where he took issue with some of our contentions – and our genial disagreements carried on throughout the sessions. The second lies in the (2019) *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* review section of his *Against the Grain* monograph, where he not only agreed to submit a response to our varied comments but also thanked us for the feedback, and concluded that “the best we can hope for is to make a rich contribution to the compost heap of scholarship so that those who plough these fields after us may have richer fertilizer” (Scott 2019: 717). May his work continue to reverberate through our field.

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