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Response: Works and Days

JAMES C. SCOTT

The large-spirited, learned, and sharp-witted organizers and contributors to this collection of essays have come to understand that I have quite mixed feelings about Festschriften and have dodged them for as long as possible. Why? Well, there are two reasons. The first reason is that such performances risk becoming a classic example of what I have elsewhere called "the public transcript." The form tends to suppress dissent in favor of praise and filters out the "backstage" chorus of criticism and parody that accompanies, and should accompany, any body of work in social science. The second reason is that such celebratory events tend to occur at the dusk of a scholar's career, and, simply by summing up a trajectory of thought, resemble an intellectual funeral. "Well, that's that; what on earth does what he wrote add up to?" Since I flatter myself that I may still have a few novel and interesting things to say, things that may change my epitaph, my inclination is to not show up at the premature wake.

At the risk of seeming small-spirited, I have still another objection to the much-honored tradition represented here. The very attempt to summarize some of what I have written over several decades is likely to convey a false sense of purpose and unity—a teleology even. It is akin to what happens in the case of a suicide or someone going berserk: the whole life's narrative is subsequently rewritten as leading to the inevitable denouement. In fact, it might have been a momentary chemical imbalance! The sansculottes who stormed the Bastille had no idea that they were participating in anything so grand as "The French Revolution." Similarly, Jim Scott had no idea that *Seeing Like a State* would follow *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

There are connections between different things I have written, and more than once, I have been both startled and convinced that a close and perceptive reader had discerned a thread of thought that was obviously there. The simple point is that these were rarely connections that I was aware of at the time. I was, instead, simply stumbling, like a crow or magpie, from one shiny object to another. Maybe the phenomenology of my journey is beside the point, but I confess that my guiding ethic was one of intellectual hedonism; I turned my attention to whatever seemed to offer the most intellectual fun. And when I had squeezed as much fun from it as I could manage, I looked around for another playground. I understand that the landscape of available intellectual playgrounds was sculpted by the larger zeitgeist of the times and by the amazing scholars and novelists whose work I devoured: E. P. Thompson, Honoré de Balzac, Marc Bloch, Leo Tolstoy, Jane Jacobs, George Orwell, Eric Hobsbawm, A. V. Chayanov, and many others. There may be a retrospective unity to my work that holds up, but that unity has escaped me.

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Before plunging into substantive matters, I do want to say that, for me, as for any scholar, the benchmark of what one has accomplished is best gauged by the work of one's students. I could, on these grounds alone, "rest my case" as a scholar based on the work that my students represented here have published. The animators of this collection, Meredith Weiss and Pamela McElwee, are foremost among them. I have learned more from their subsequent writings than I managed to teach them as PhD students.

Rather than comment on their essays one by one, risking tedium all around, I shall take up some of the issues they raise that seem to be of interest to readers in general.

Pamela McElwee reminds me of another "red thread" in my work that I was not conscious of at the time, but now, having it stitched together so convincingly, I am happy to retrospectively see myself as a political ecologist. That, indeed, is a theme that links the importance of common property resources for Vietnamese and Burmese villagers in the 1930s, the resistance to mechanization of the rice harvest in village Malaysia in the late 1970s, the ecological harm of scientific forestry in Germany, the adaptive subsistence strategies of those resisting state incorporation in upland Southeast Asia, and the unique ecological novelty of sedentary grain farming in the earliest Sumerian villages. How could I not have seen these connections at the time? Perhaps it is the zeitgeist using me as its pawn.

The massive detour that *Against the Grain* represented, both temporally and geographically, was something partly unintended that became totally gripping. I was asked to deliver the Tanner Lectures, an honor I wanted to postpone, having just finished another book. It could not be postponed, and I had only a few months to craft something worthy of the honor. I reasoned that perhaps I could update the lectures I had been giving for some years on the domestication of grain, sedentism, and the earliest states. I thought it would require a survey of the last two decades of new archaeological and historical work on the topic. To my surprise, I quickly realized that most of my lectures were either dead wrong or seriously misleading. The actual lectures I gave were more a report on my ignorance than a new synthesis. I spent the next three years repairing my ignorance and crafting a new synthesis of what we then knew about the earliest agrarian states. I was terrified of what the archaeologists would think of the work of such an interloper, but to my surprise, it was generally well received. And, of course, it led me to political ecology, or hunting and gathering, pastoralism, sedentism, and cereal grains. So, I am delighted that a true political ecologist like McElwee should welcome me to the fold, even though I largely thought I was still trying to understand "the peasantry"!

There are two noteworthy issues arising largely from perceptive and critical readings of *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: (1) whether "everyday forms of resistance actually amount to anything of political significance" and (2) whether my critique of Antonio Gramsci properly addresses his concept of "hegemony."

As for "everyday forms of resistance" and whether they matter, my equivocal answer is, "It depends." The same holds true, I would claim, for more overt resistance that takes the form of riots, mutinies, or social movements. Sometimes they lead to further changes, even to revolutions, and at other times, to reaction and repression. It depends on the larger context. Thus, the "infra-politics" of poaching, squatting, and military desertion can, under some conditions, lead to repression, and at other times, to the fall of an entire regime and revolution. It would be hard to account for the Russian Revolution

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of 1917 without the mass desertion of soldiers of the Western Front and their return to rural Russia to grab land for themselves. The result was not, of course, foreordained.

"Hegemony" is a different matter, and I came to understand that I owe a tardy apology to the ghost of Antonio Gramsci for using that term in the Malaysian context rather than "domination." Gramsci is clear that "hegemony" should only be applied to political contexts in which the franchise is universal and open political competition prevails. His purpose, after all, was to argue that even in such conditions, the institutional power of the media, the church, and political and commercial elites so saturated the proletariat with countervailing and demobilizing propaganda that a peaceful, democratic shift of power was unachievable. Malaysia, at the time I was doing my fieldwork in "Sedaka," had most of the formal institutions of democracy, but no one imagined that open militant opposition to the ruling party (United Malays National Organization) was an option. Thus, in that context, and recognizing that the institutions of democracy were largely a façade, I should have used what Gramsci called "domination" to describe it.

Shaila Seshia Galvin's fine essay on *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (published in 1976!) reminds me of both my age and my intellectual debts. It was the culmination of my effort to repair my miseducation as a political science graduate student at Yale and to become a "peasantist" and a Southeast Asianist worthy of the name. To do this involved reading the works of scholars seldom, if ever, found on a political science syllabus: E. P. Thompson, A. V. Chayanov, Marc Bloch, Eric Hobsbawm, R. C. Cobb, Teodor Shanin, Eric Wolf, and many others. As Galvin points out, some of the themes I invoked in describing the "subsistence ethic" have reappeared in a new guise in contemporary social science literature—for example, "precarity." It would have been a better book if I had had the advantage of absorbing this new attention to "life at the precipice." My argument, as I now understand it, was partly a "rational choice" analysis (*avant la lettre*) about choices under severe constraints (min-max behavior in game-theoretic terms) and an argument about how, over time, social forms of subsistence security acquire a moral power that in turn motivates political action.

Curiously, I was less concerned about the criticism coming from Samuel Popkin (author of *The Rational Peasant*—as if "my" peasants were altruistic or crazy!) than from reading the work of historians and anthropologists, which convinced me that what was woefully missing from my analysis was an understanding of peasant religion and culture—that is, the context in which their choices and moral reasoning took place. I tried, during a year of leave, to repair the oversight by a wider reading. The result was a two-part article published in *Theory and Society* in 1977.[1] It, like most articles, sank without a trace, but it was later incorporated into a small collection of several articles.[2] One can live a long and happy life without ever reading it, but I believe that, read alongside *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, it represents a far more rounded analysis.

Takeshi Ito gives me more credit than I deserve for an being an "ecological thinker" before it was fashionable. I am not complaining, mind you, but when he writes that I pay

[1]James C. Scott, "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition," *Theory and Society* 4, no. 1 (1977); 1–38; 4, no. 4 (1977): 211–46.
[2]James C. Scott, *Decoding Subaltern Politics: Ideology, Disguise, and Resistance in Agrarian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

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"exceptionally close attention to how actors' social relations and ecological contexts inform their decisions and behavior," that is entirely a consequence of the outsized influence that A. V. Chayanov and especially Karl Polanyi had on me at the time. Chayanov, a follower of the Austrian School of household studies, taught me through his absolutely meticulous analysis of the allocation of family labor, crop timing, spending, land rental and purchase, day labor, and tenancy the micro-specificity of the calculus involved and how it tracked family structure and development. Polanyi, for his part, taught me much of what I know, and his work, especially *The Great Transformation*,[3] may be the most important scholarly influence in my life. Trained in college as a would-be economist, it was a revolution to me to be told that *land and labor* as abstract factors of production were simply invented in the early nineteenth century as neoclassical economics terms for *nature and human life* writ large, respectively. In retrospect, it is so obvious that one would not think that anyone would need to be told. Nevertheless, it instantly became a drumbeat in my head and has been constantly pounding ever since, I hope to good effect.

Once Polanyi had colonized my terra nullius brain, he infected most of my work. Land and labor, in the calculus of most economists, are "units": so many acres of such-and-such quality, so many "hands" needed at a factory; a forest is so many board-feet of lumber that can be extracted, a city a designer's grid for housing and commerce, a river so many acre-feet of irrigation water or so many kilowatts of generated electricity, a cow so many gallons milk or pounds of beef. The presumptively inert quality of the units has been the basis for assumptions about manipulability that have often proved catastrophic. What I did not do at the time, and wish that I had, is to understand the deep connections within the natural world that *Homo sapiens* (me among them) were blind to and have come back to virtually destroy our world.

Eric Tagliacozzo takes up the issue of whether my argument in *The Art of Not Being Governed* is "a bridge too far," as many critics have claimed. Only partly in jest, I claim two defenses, "Your Honor." The first is that Willem van Schendel, the renowned Dutch scholar from whom I poached the concept of Zomia, claimed that "Zomia" extended far west of Southeast Asia to include Afghanistan and many of the Central Asian republics. I was more modest in confining it to "classical" Southeast Asia, claiming, in the words of Clint Eastwood, that "a man has to know his limitations." Second, Tagliacozzo raises the prospect of extending the term "Zomia" to include the many flora and fauna that have, as it were, sought refuge in out-of-the-way-places. I am completely in accord with this suggestion and, for that matter, believe it can be applied to New World indigenous flora and fauna, which often survive only as relict populations in less inhabited uplands, deserts, and marshes. But surely these are both calls to make "Zomia" more capacious biologically and geographically than I have done.

"Regions of refuge" from state formation and conquest are, in fact, far more variegated than the uplands of Southeast Asia that I examined. Swamps, marshes, fens, deltas, mangrove swamps, and, above all, the sea itself have been regions of refuge.

[3]Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 49 (originally published 1944).

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None are more significant, I believe, than the "sea" people (also known as "sea gypsies" or *orang laut*) in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. So also, of course, are the ungovernable margins of urban slums where the police seldom venture, illustrating the vital fact that such regions of refuge are as much a social construction as a geographic barrier.

I realized as I drafted that book that some of the claims were speculative (e.g., chapter 6½!); I elected to be provocative in the interest of spurring further research and discussion. Readers of my work may have noted that I rarely circle back to defend my previous work; it cannot help but seem defensive, and I prefer to move on to the next shiny object.

There is little doubt in my mind that in the last few decades my analysis of "Zomia" makes less sense than it did, say, in 1960. Three processes have, in my view, been responsible. The first is the mass movement, forced and voluntary, of lowland majority populations, considered more loyal to the state, to the frontiers and borders as a strategic measure. The second is the realization that a region previously thought fiscally sterile is, in fact, a treasure of natural resources (e.g., timber, valuable minerals, hydroelectric sites). The third and final process is the technology to remake the landscape (e.g., bulldozers, dynamite, chain saws, reinforced concrete), which includes the clearing of land for new settlers who work plantations and grow cash crops that enhance state revenue. The expanding reach of the state has meant that for many previously quasi-autonomous peoples, the question is no longer how to avoid the state, but rather how to negotiate the most favorable terms of incorporation.

One of the most delightful aspects of Meredith Weiss's essay, for me, is that she makes the case that I am, despite many claims to the contrary, still practicing political science and making contributions to the discipline! A notable political scientist who read my *Seeing Like a State*, I am told, said to a colleague, "Well it's a wonderful book, but it is certainly not political science." Such assertions that I had "left the plantation" had ceased to bother me. In fact, when I gave a talk in Canada a couple of decades ago and the small poster about my talk identified me only as an anthropologist, I practically leapt for joy; I had finally "passed" as an anthropologist.

As Weiss implies, I never had the sense of abandoning political science; I simply was posing questions that could not be adequately addressed by the techniques of statistical analysis, formal modeling, and "natural experiments." Ethnography and history were essential to those questions. As I understand it, political science, in its search for universal, lawlike generalizations about human behavior, wandered away from me. Here, briefly, I want to make the case that ethnographic method is central to the study of politics. Virtually all studies of political elites ascribe to them, inter alia, political ideas, educational formation, social and aesthetic tastes, a sense of history and purpose, and individuality. Virtually all political studies of mass publics (e.g., peasants, workers, the poor) tend to characterize them on the basis of their statistical profile: their income, years of schooling, ethnicity, religion, occupation, and whether they are urban or rural. Ethnography, at a minimum, proposes to extend the respect automatically accorded to elites to mass publics as well.

The point is simply this: to the degree that the goal of a political inquiry is to understand why a group of people act the way they do, the indispensable first step is to ask them for their best description of their own actions, of what they think they are up to and why. This does not mean that their explanation is to be taken at face value, or that what they say

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does not require careful further examination. The same would be the case for the pope! But to propose to elucidate anyone's actions without first coming to grips with their own description of it is not only rude and disrespectful—it amounts to practicing social science behind people's backs. Social science cannot end with the actor's self-understanding, but it must always begin there.

I "get" Ronald Herring's point: namely, that the forms of unobtrusive resistance I examine—and celebrate—are very much at work in the case of genetically modified crops in India and elsewhere, and that the "eye" of the state and its regulatory agencies cannot possibly discern the needs of millions of farmers, let alone their soils, crop mixes, labor supply, weather, and temporal choices. It is a convincing instance of precisely the forms of high-modernist governance and their evasion by, in this case, farmers, that I have highlighted.

And yet, I feel hoisted on my own petard! I do understand the logic behind the evasion: the yield of Bt crops is usually superior, the net profit is often larger, and the use of even more destructive pesticides is avoided. But there is little in his account about the possible long-term consequences of GMOs, the effects on the loss of biodiversity of land races, the reported appearance of super-weeds resistant to Bt, the evolution of wild "relatives" with which they might hybridize, and the effects of property patents on new "life forms," even if it only means adding an amino acid. The widespread introduction of GMO crops has seemed to me, though I am no expert, to be a bold experiment, the results of which cannot yet be known. In such contexts, I am inclined to favor the precautionary principle except in the case of an existential crisis that merits taking large risks. In this respect, I was cheered by news in the last year that conventionally bred major crops in Europe had been roughly as successful as GMOs in terms of yields and profitability with fewer of the "known-unknowns" and "unknown-unknowns."

I also "get it" that my ecological concerns in this respect suggest that I must abandon some of my critique in favor of a regulatory state that attempts, however ineffectively, to prevent or restrict certain technologies. In this case, point made: Scott finds himself in a contradiction—Uncle! But I suppose Herring is, as he suggests at the end of his essay, aboard the same ship as I. He surely sees the wisdom of enforcing vaccination in a deadly epidemic if that is the only way to save lives; he surely sees the wisdom of regulating or forbidding the cloning of human beings. Exactly where the line is drawn, reasonable people can disagree about. I tend to be especially cautious about such experiments on the basis of what I see historically in the development of industrial agriculture, of plantations, the loss of biodiversity, the monocultures of forestry, the disassembly of rivers into industrial and agricultural "inputs," and so on. So much of what seemed unambiguous advances in human welfare to the last few generations have turned out to have deeply sobering unintended consequences. So many of the illnesses of our civilizations turn out to be iatrogenic ailments: the consequence of prior "remedies."

I end with a poem by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska that seems to me to capture our moment.[4]

[4]Published in *The New Yorker*, December 14, 1992, translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh.

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Maybe All This
by Wisława Szymborska

Maybe all this
is happening in some lab?
Under one lamp by day
and billions by night?

Maybe we're experimental generations?
Poured from one vial to the next,
shaken in test tubes,
not scrutinized by eyes alone,
each of us separately
plucked up by tweezers in the end?

Or maybe it's more like this:
No interference?
The changes occur on their own
according to plan?
The graph's needle slowly etches
its predictable zigzags?

Maybe thus far we aren't of much interest?
The control monitors aren't usually plugged in?
Only for wars, preferably large ones,
for the odd ascent above our clump of Earth,
for major migrations from point A to B?

Maybe just the opposite:
They've got a taste for trivia up there?
Look! on the big screen a little girl
is sewing a button on her sleeve.
The radar shrieks,
the staff comes at a run.
What a darling little being
with its tiny heart beating inside it!
How sweet, its solemn
threading of the needle!
Someone cries enraptured:
Get the Boss,
tell him he's got to see this for himself!

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