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Political Science: Seeing Like a Subversive Social Scientist

MEREDITH L. WEISS

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Much of the work of political science revolves around institutions—the structures through which politics happens. Leaders enter the frame, of course, but often as institutions in human form: presidents, premiers, populists, and mobilizers who serve to channel and direct who does what and what they do, much like an agency or law. We might trace this pseudo-structural, largely mechanical reading of human agency to political scientists of an earlier era: the behavioralists of the 1950s and 1960s. James C. Scott began his career as just such a scholar. For his dissertation-turned-book, *Political Ideology in Malaysia: Reality and the Beliefs of an Elite*,[1] Scott surveyed a gaggle of Malaysian bureaucrats to examine, effectively, the extent to which their values and assumptions supported or subverted the new democracy they served. Although itself fairly prosaic, that work foreshadows the political grime and games that soon pulled Scott in more promising directions theoretically, whether scrutinizing Southeast Asia or global patterns: disentangling structure from norms, finding agency around the margins of class and state, and rethinking how power looks and functions.

Over time, Scott never lost interest in the *people* who enact politics. He humanized first these people, as more than abstracted elites and masses, and then the structures they made up. One of Scott's chief contributions to the discipline is his disarticulation of agency in this way: of understanding even structural (or, for that matter, ideology-based) explanations as reducible to the concatenation of micro-level, self-interested and/or community-regarding decisions. That disaggregation happens at the level of ideas—namely, the oversimplification he debunks in common frames of revolutions as being "about" nationalism, or communism, or whatever else, rather than discordant "parochial ends" among "'rank-and-file' rebels."[2] But he is equally skeptical of the Big Structures of political science: socioeconomic classes and states. This work began with Scott's deep dive into patron-client relations and the individuated (and, ultimately, fragile) "moral economy" undergirding these.[3] We move over the course of this research program

Meredith Weiss (mweiss@albany.edu) is Professor of Political Science in the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

[1]James C. Scott, *Political Ideology in Malaysia: Reality and the Beliefs of an Elite* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968).

[2]James C. Scott, "Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars," *Theory and Society* 7, no. 1–2 (1979): 97–98.

[3]See, for example, James C. Scott, "The Erosion of Patron-Client Bonds and Social Change in Rural Southeast Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 32, no. 1 (1972): 5–37; Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 91–113;

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from class positions (patron or client) as structurally determined and significantly confining to those allowing for, and even requiring, negotiation and assertion. By *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*,[4] we find the structurally subordinate decidedly empowered, if still disadvantaged; peasants are no longer interchangeable cogs in a class structure, bound by economic logic, but fully sentient, creative, riled-up agents. They *do* "make their own history," as Karl Marx put it, whatever the limits imagination and circumstance allow, but substantially off-the-record.

That effort finds its most incisive expression in two later books, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* and *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*.[5] I will focus on these two works here. The first takes *Weapons of the Weak* a step further: structure becomes explicitly neither constraint nor motive force, but a *stage* on which individuals across socioeconomic (structural) positions perform "politics." That stage is itself confining, and the script resists extemporizing; the cast decompresses in the wings. The latter book shifts the frame to find complex agency in the state—joining a larger debate about what the state is and is not, but ultimately forcing us to see it more as agent than as institution.

Throughout, Scott starts from a lens honed in lived experience on the ground in Malaysia (and later, Burma). Dissecting the meanings in field research findings, then looking for wider resonances, Scott reveals the layered workings of power, compliance, and resistance in everyday life, quite apart from their salience for distal superstructures of the state. Those approaches and premises remain the foundation for his study of the state, however. What defines the state, what compels resistance (most obviously and debilitatingly through evasion and flight), and what confounds domination is human agency.

Scott's methods not only distinguish his oeuvre, but also represent a key part of his significance for political science. His work demonstrates that prospecting in ethnographic minutiae, probing the voids and silences of the public sphere, and finding the subtexts in displays of dominance and subservience alike may yield deep insight into politics. That reliance on interpretive methods has carried through as Scott has moved from field research in Malaysia to synthesizing a polyglot, global mix of texts, from history to folklore to literature to tax records; his recent work brings even landscape itself into the critical frame. Scott is hardly the first or the only political scientist to approach the study of politics ethnographically, interpretively, or, broadly speaking, as more art than science, particularly within Asian studies. But the fact that the tropes he developed through these methods have become so canonical for the discipline—the whole notion of "weapons of the weak," for example, organically claimed rather than state conferred, and confronting holders of political, economic, and social power alike—matters.

Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).

[4]James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[5]James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990); Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

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We see Scott's legacy in the political scientists he helped train as students—such as Benedict Kerkvliet, in his remarkable explorations of mobilization and resistance in the Philippines, then Vietnam,[6] or Kevin O'Brien or Daniel Kelliher, who probe the strategy and subterfuge by which Chinese farmers and workers turn structures of domination to their advantage.[7] But Scott's methods and mindset reverberate among other scholars, too, from Arun Agrawal, whose ethnographic research among such communities as migrant shepherds and village-level conservationists in India plumbs the exercise and experience of power,[8] to Diana Kim, as she unravels the Southeast Asian colonial state, dazzled and dismayed by opium, into an array of hapless, problem-solving bureaucrats.[9] Scott not only models peering under, around, and beyond formal structures—to see politics and power at their root, in other words—but has secured a still well-populated, lively niche in the discipline for such work, impervious to the encroachment of positivist number crunchers and hypothesis testers.

Complicating Socioeconomic Class: Agency as Everywhere

What may be Scott's most expansive and enduring contribution to the study of politics is his particular reading of it as comprising so much more than its institutional exoskeleton. His is not the only "worm's-eye view" of politics in the literature, but it is a distinctively nuanced and critical one. Individuals—as citizens, but also as members of moral communities—have manifold channels for resistance, engagement, commiseration, and celebration. These individuals are more than mere subordinates who confirm the power of the dominant; their empowerment stems not only from the state, but also from empathetic communities, norms and economic relations of reciprocity, and innate skepticism.

Much of Scott's work serves to clarify and amplify the interests and, at times, the voices of the powerless in order better to understand the workings of power. Particularly key is the trio of works that both seared Scott's mark on political science and have reassured generations of ethnographically inclined PhD students that this sort of work *is* political science and not "just" anthropology: *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, *Weapons of the Weak*, and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. It is in *Domination* that Scott refines what agency looks like—to the outside observer as well as the inside

[6]See, for example, Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[7]Among other works, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979–1989* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

[8]For example, Arun Agrawal, *Greener Pastures: Politics, Markets, and Community among a Migrant Pastoral People* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

[9]Diana S. Kim, *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020).

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practitioner—and how it functions to maintain what is really an illusion of coherent, determinative socioeconomic class structures. For him, it is not fixed structure, but more a complex interplay of norms and performances that sustains order. Class becomes a highly consequential shared construct, in this reading, much as Timothy Mitchell suggests, near contemporaneously, of the state: best understood "not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist."[10]

At the heart of the matter lies the concept of the "infrapolitics" of the formally powerless: the everyday politics, of class relations especially, encoded in myriad everyday acts, from tax evasion to snide asides to working-to-rule. This front of the class war easily slips through a filter of institutional analysis—it appears as merely the lattice of class relations on which "politics" rests. It evades, too, the rubrics of social movements, collective action, or contentious politics,[11] spanning decades now in sociology and political science, for its recognition of the purposes and potential of *individual* action, where and when collective action lacks promise. Political science still has not quite embraced the notion of thinking and practice out of joint, since the institutional face—docile peasantries and proletariats, accepting the inevitability of the feudalism or neoliberalism under which they fail really to thrive—reveals so little of the turmoil within.

Scott convinces us that we cannot read too much into the apparent compliance of subordinated groups and their displays of deference; that deference is a consequence, not a source, of the prevailing system of social stratification, and it is ultimately voluntary (however constrained the choice), contingent, potentially itself subversive,[12] and partial. That there *is* a "backstage" on which insubordination plays out simultaneously with humble compliance makes plain the working of agency in what appears, on its face, structurally determined.

Meanwhile, the conventional binary of consent/submission versus open rebellion misses a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance unlikely to make it into official records—another core Scott insight for political science and other fields. While *Domination* frames these forms as safety valves first and foremost, we might also see in sequestered sites for autonomous discourse—the articulation of "hidden transcripts"—the core ingredients of the social capital that enables individuated acts to seed collective action.

But really, whether resistance leaves an institutional footprint is beside the point, at least from the perspective of refining disciplinary insight. Rather, what really matters is that political scientists take seriously discourse, artifice, evasion, and mockery as *political*, inasmuch as they *are* all about power and its exercise—just far more in the sense of self-empowerment than coercive power. The "power-to" versus "power-over" distinction at

[10]Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 94.

[11]For example, Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2005); Peter Millward and Shaminder Takhar, "Social Movements, Collective Action and Activism," *Sociology* 53, no. 3 (2019): NP1–12.

[12]For example, Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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the crux of so much feminist scholarship on politics[13] relies on the same core understanding.

Rather than a disembodied mass, helplessly constrained by subordinate structural position, the poor are individuals with agency to act and to combine in different ways. However much they may resent an order that has dealt them a weak hand, they ultimately *choose* to play along—but they simultaneously flip the tables offstage, keeping their vocabulary and tools for resistance whetted but tucked away. (We might consider present-day members-only social media platforms to be virtual "backstages," useful either to quarantine or to channel disruptive action.) Meanwhile, class structure constrains the dominant (in ways that political science still rarely heeds), since it is in their interest to sustain the institutions from which they benefit.

The notion of class analysis as *structural* (and structuring) dates back at least to Marx, but it remains canonical in political science.[14] Scott does not deny the structural quality of class, but he complicates how we understand its political effects: as the composite of disparate individual actions; as sustaining both external and internal faces, with differing functions; and as subject to canny (if incomplete) evasion rather than solid and impermeable.

Reimagining the State

In his earlier works, the state was really epiphenomenal to Scott's account. Through the 1980s and early 1990s, what drew most other political scientists, at least in the United States, to Southeast Asia was authoritarianism and/or developmental statehood; this was still the era of the triptych of Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto, and Mahathir Mohamad (version 1), and of the pre–financial crisis "Asian miracle." Scott largely left such formal, top-tier politics behind when he ditched civil servants for patrons and peasants after his first book; we might see his turn to party machines and bosses[15] as the pivot between frames, as he scaled down to the grassroots. Infrapolitics is a deeply local politics, of individual actors within their own communities, interacting with those a rung or two up or down on the hierarchy of political-economic control. But by the 1990s, Scott, too, had turned his gaze to the state and its counterpart society, albeit with the same deconstructive approach he took to socioeconomic class.

His work joined a phalanx of other interrogations in political science and sociology of what the state really *was* and what it might do—a school loosely glossed under the title of Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol's *Bringing the State Back In*.[16] This literature probed how best to conceptualize "the state"—its boundary or overlap with "society"; its capacity for autonomous interests, preferences, or actions; its

[13]For example, Amy Allen, "Rethinking Power," *Hypatia* 13, no. 1 (1998): 21–40.

[14]Two especially prominent works are Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[15]For example, James C. Scott, "Corruption, Machine Politics, and Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (1969): 1142–58.

[16]Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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structural, human, and normative components; the evolution and shape of state institutions; what constrains states and what states constrain. We might see Scott's *Seeing Like a State* as falling squarely within this tradition . . . and yet pulling the literature in a new direction.

Scott's lens (along with, for instance, that of fellow Southeast Asianist Benedict Anderson) validated for the discipline an understanding of politics as something that happens not just within the ambit or influence of formal institutions or less formal organizations, but also through modes of expression and evasion. With nods to Michel Foucault and others, Scott examines how, and to what extent, the state structures society—since, as for socioeconomic elites, the (overlapping) stratum of state elites, couched in state institutions, requires subordinates to dominate. In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott essentially anthropomorphizes states as they bumble along, struggling to organize and count their holdings, the better to claim what they can. (Extraction of revenue offers a convenient synecdoche for state capacity, in ways that scholars such as Charles Tilly, Margaret Levi, and Mancur Olson have elaborated.[17])

Core to Scott's approach from the outset, and hence with particular impact on the discipline, has been close examination of politics' component parts: what connects leaders to the communities they purport to lead, how parties socialize voters to participate, and how bureaucrats make sense of societies. To understand the import for political science of *Seeing Like a State*, we might take a step back, to the theoretical and ideological groundwork Scott laid earlier for understanding politics as conjoining transactional and more normative and emotive interactions—and to politics as being ultimately about mutuality and exchange rather than one-sided domination, and no more static than the urbanizing, industrializing Southeast Asian societies on which Scott focused.

His key works specifically on "political change" start from the premise that postcolonial political development layers new institutions atop old ones, rather than starting from scratch; holdover relationships and practices inevitably temper how new modes function. Hence Scott's reading of corruption—petty bribery, for instance—as an "*alternative means of interest articulation*" that rests on "the very character of loyalties in a transitional nation."[18] It is amid these practices and ties that urban machines developed (with perhaps implausibly teleological tidiness) in postcolonial Asia and Africa, amid the expansion of suffrage and competitive elections. Scott argues that these machines, premised on distribution rather than ideals, socialize voters into a highly particularistic political order, nevertheless tethered to the larger political system.

The underlying argument of how citizens so structurally disempowered find agency in an increasingly formalized political order remains foundational both to the study of clientelism and patronage and, more subtly, to Scott's subsequent work on the layering of visible institutions and informal substrates comprising political participation. The larger issue here is understanding and parsing the messy underbelly of politics to reveal

[17]See, respectively, Charles Tilly, "War-Making and State-Making as Organized Crime," in Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*, 169–87; Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 567–76.
[18]Scott, "Corruption, Machine Politics, and Political Change," 1142–43 (emphasis in original).

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resistance to regularization: the varyingly moral, instrumental, and institutionalized filigree of political affiliation and comportment.

That fundamental querying of the origins, functions, and interests embedded within, and constitutive of, political institutions resurfaces in *Seeing Like a State*. Scott situates states' authority and actions vis-à-vis the evasions and compliance of their erstwhile subjects: we see state and citizens as mutually dependent and comparably wily, and states as no more omniscient than omnipotent. Territorially defined modern states are fundamentally fixed (notwithstanding moderately elastic borders); citizens are inherently potentially fugitive. Hence, the prime imperative that states face is to capture and hold their (taxpaying) population.

Local-level moral economies rather mysteriously agglomerate to an impenetrable, depersonalized, yet still interest-laden operation for extraction and control. The party machines and patrons that Scott sketched earlier give way to bureaucracy, less temporally—state making starts early—than in terms of focal point. What matters to the state is not mobilizing voters; the state reads here as a fundamentally authoritarian entity. (The kinder, gentler particularism of machine politics need not contradict this vision, but presumably acts as a mediating buffer between institutional state and citizens.) Rather, states aim to simplify administration—to render land and people legible and governable. Yet states' subjects retain agency, at least to complicate legibility via organic, translation-resistant *metis*. Submission is therefore invariably, even if subtly, coerced; frequently counterproductive, as state schemes fail; and always at least a bit tenuous.

Studying Government: The Ungoverned and Ungovernable

All told, these efforts amplify what is most emancipatory in politics—albeit for the grasping functionary as much as the purported noble peasant—as what most warrants close study. Seeing politics as Scott would have us do draws our attention to productive fissures rather than the surface routine of workaday politics-as-usual. The lens that his work has brought to or nurtured within political science is one of scrutinizing the spokes of political wheels, not just in terms of how they concatenate with the center; never assuming structures to be inevitable or interest-free; and understanding "politics" as pervasive rather than fixating too much on the institutional tip of the political iceberg. In short, his work encourages political scientists to think outside the institutional box, as we disentangle who's really pulling which strings and why.

Scott would surely scoff at an insistence on labeling him as a political scientist, whatever his formal pedigree. Yet his contributions to that discipline and to how we approach the questions of power at its core have been pivotal. Scott and the epistemic community he has nurtured have validated a decidedly polymorphous conceptualization of power: institutional and not, of patrons and of clients, to consent and to evade, and both -over and -to. For so many political scientists, that example and space have been truly empowering.

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