James C. Scott: A Tribute

FKA Editorial Collective

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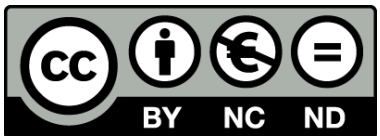

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James C. Scott, political scientist and anthropologist, passed away on 19 July 2024 at the age of 87. He was Sterling Professor of Political Science and Director of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University – and a farmer. His scholarship focused 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.