

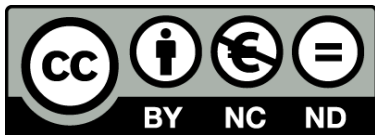
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Feminist Archaeology and the Legacy of James Scott: Interventions in the Writing of Women’s History

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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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