Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist

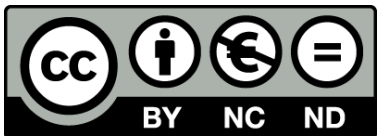
Alex Sager

Zitiervorschlag
Alex Sager. 2025. Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist. Forum Kritische Archäologie 14, Theme Issue: Unearthing Resistance – James C. Scott's Legacy for Critical Archaeologies and Histories: 29–33.

URL https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de

DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-47043

ISSN 2194-346X



Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist

Alex Sager

Portland State University, alexander.sager@pdx.edu

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 dept 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.

References

Clastres, Pierre. 2022. *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*. New York: Zone Books.

De Genova, Nicholas, ed. 2017. *The Borders of "Europe": Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Krasner, Stephen D. 2011. State, Power, Anarchism: A Discussion of The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. *Perspectives on Politics* 9(1): 79–83. DOI: 10.1017/S1537592710003312.

Longo, Matthew and Bernardo Zacka. 2019. Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key. *American Political Science Review* 113(4): 1066–1070. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055419000431.

Losurdo, Domenico. 2011. *Liberalism: A Counter-History*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London and New York: Verso Books.

Mills, Charles W. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Nail, Thomas. 2015. *The Figure of the Migrant*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Nichols, Robert. 2013. Indigeneity and the Settler Contract Today. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39(2): 165–186. DOI: 10.1177/0191453712470359.

Pateman, Carole. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

van Schendel, Willem. 2005. Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia. In Henk Schulte Nordholt and Remco Raben, eds.: *Locating Southeast Asia. Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*, pp. 275–307. Leiden: Brill.

Scott, James C. 1977. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, James C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, James C. 2014. *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Scott, James C. 2017. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott, James C. 2025. *In Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life It Brings*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vinthagen, Stellan. 2020. The Journal of Resistance Studies' Interview with James C. Scott. *Journal of Resistance Studies* 6(1): 136–156.