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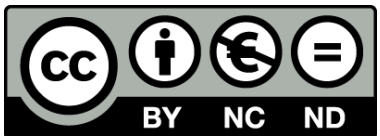

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A Southeast Asian Archaeologist's Perspective on James Scott's Contributions to the Field

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More than an entire archaeological generation has passed since "post-processual" critiques up-ended the world of archaeological theory, and we now travel through a rich and varied theoretical landscape that draws inspiration from scholarship from the natural sciences to the humanities. Our collective obsession with new methodologies still threatens to overwhelm our interpretive frameworks, as advances in science, geomatics, and AI offer ever more precise tools for data recovery and analysis. Against this backdrop, and with metrics looming ever larger as the primary criterion of intellectual success, it is perhaps not surprising how few archaeologists today read the source literature from which we draw our dominant theoretical frameworks. Like their predecessors a generation ago, most archaeologists still engage in the mining-and-bridging strategy that Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt (1993: 3) described during the peak of the post-processual era: grab a current approach from the social sciences or humanities and cobble it into archaeological shape, without fully understanding the source field from which it originated. Few archaeologists today cite Immanuel Wallerstein when they invoke some revisionist world-systems model, and still fewer mention Benedict Anderson when discussing variations on imagined communities. We are not unique among scholars in doing this, as such ideas become deeply embedded in our interpretive world. Yet understanding how this intellectual current shape-shifts as it wafts across the field of archaeology requires returning to its source. James Scott has been a more important contributor to these currents of the last several decades than I suspect most archaeologists recognize.

Contributors to this issue have been asked to consider how James C. Scott's work has influenced the field and also our scholarship. As a Southeast Asian archaeologist who studies ancient states, I have been particularly drawn to James Scott's scholarship on power relations and the state. Surprisingly, relatively few archaeological colleagues outside of historical archaeology engaged with his work before his 2017 publication, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. This publication both represented conventional archaeological thought to the public and drew ample and occasionally heated responses from archaeologists (e.g., Campbell 2019; Stark 2019a). Scott's work has, however, also impacted archaeological interpretation for several decades, both indirectly (through our adoption of methodologies based on his conceptual framework) and – more rarely – directly through archaeologists' use of his theoretical constructs.

My goal in this essay is to highlight elements of his research program that align with archaeological research themes and review some examples of his influence in the field and my research program. Despite my most earnest efforts, readers will surely find gaps in my citation of archaeological works for which I apologize in advance. I will also explore other elements of James Scott's work that could enrich archaeological interpretation if we paid more attention to them.

Elements of James Scott's Research that Align with Archaeological Themes

James Scott was a social scientist whose scholarship on Malaysia and Burma/Myanmar crossed multiple disciplinary lines to understand agrarian studies and peasant societies. His PhD in political science analyzed Malaysian civil servants in an emerging post-colonial state. Following the publication of several books – and (he notes) in response to the Vietnam War movement – he turned his attention to peasant studies, where two years

of ethnographic fieldwork among Malaysian rice farmers provided him with material for more than half a dozen subsequent books. Each has developed a specific premise that argued against the efficacy of centralized state power, Marxist or otherwise, about hegemony and resistance, offering provocative insights at an increasingly broader scale. The same macro lens and taste for master narrative that has drawn collegial ire in some circles (e.g., Lieberman 2010; Aung-Thwin 2011; D'Altroy 2019) or at least disquiet in others (e.g., Pollock 2019: 705) has also wrought significant global impact: more than 32,000 publications have cited his *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* alone. Citations to his work appear in research as distant from anthropology as the financialization of housing, urban informality, and the constitution of postgenomic life. Myriad obituaries and memorials attest to his scholarly corpus's impact on interpretive social science in the study of agrarian societies, but I contend in this article that Jim Scott's work has influenced archaeological interpretation in ways that may not be immediately recognizable to our community of practice.

It is James Scott's foray into ethnographically-tinged agrarian studies that holds the greatest potential for archaeologists, both because so many of us seek to understand power relations and the state and because so many archaeologists study agrarian societies. Scott's work is ready-made for archaeology because of his insistence that power relations are "firmly anchored in material practices" (Scott 1990: 188) and because so much of what we study – from people's latrines, their trash dumps, and their abandoned houses – offers insights on what people did, not what they said or wrote. His materialist focus and interest in the tensions created from efforts at state domination and bottom-up resistance and in the kinds of subversive techniques that people employ (which he termed "everyday forms of resistance") offer interpretive scaffolding to archaeologists who study power relations using the archaeological record. We cannot directly identify the acts of resistance that Scott describes using ethnographic and documentary records – poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging, disloyalty, slander, theft, or sabotage (e.g., Thurston 2007: 274) – but we can track the emergence of discrete groups that may have acted against the state. We can also study efforts by ancient states to bolster elite control through simplification and standardization, even when these same measures often produce instability and impel resistance (Yoffee 2019: 2).

Much of James Scott's work concentrated on the historical development of institutionalized modern state power and domination, and at least five of his books are considered broadly influential in understanding state development (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990, 1998, 2017). Scott was particularly interested in how subordinate groups resisted power more frequently through covert than through public acts of resistance. His two-year ethnographic sojourn among Malay farmers gave him insights into life under direct state hegemony where people could not organize openly. Within this setting, he observed community members collaborating regularly to resist state directives through what he called "infra politics" that created "hidden transcripts" that actively resisted state mandates (1990). Such actions, undertaken with a tacit conspiracy of silence toward the authorities, were far more common than public revolts but still had a kind of agency that, under some circumstances, generated social change.

Scott uses the concept of "legibility" to describe the process of institutionalizing the means to extract labor, goods, and services from a subject population through bureaucracy and personal domination, including serfdom and slavery (1998). Historically documented and contemporary states inscribed their power on populations through censuses, taxes, enslavement, conscription, resettlement, roads, and environmental reconfiguration, such as re-routing waterways. Such legibility brought benefits to elite citizens (and notably literacy) while providing the state with the tools to track and conscript its citizens.

Scott's Southeast Asian expertise led him to explore the politics surrounding the retreat from state power (2009). He began his area studies in Burma, home to both lowland populations involved in intensive rice cultivation and upland Indigenous groups. These upland regions, labeled as Zomia (as discussed in Michaud 2010) or as the Dong World (Anderson and Whitmore 2015), were inhabited by numerous large populations who practiced swidden agriculture. Their lands spanned contemporary southern and southwestern China and northern Southeast Asia, allowing these populations to move seamlessly across a vast montane region. Drawing from the work of earlier ethnographers and historians, Scott viewed these upland groups as refugees from lowland state systems. He argued that subsistence choices within these state systems could be politically motivated rather than merely environmentally constrained. Some groups chose to escape the state by relocating to non-state spaces, which in Southeast Asia were primarily upland areas but could also include other environmental settings, such as swamps, marshes, and oceans. Scott contended that both governed (state) and ungoverned (nonstate or extra-state) spaces developed alongside each other throughout history.

Archaeologists are likely more comfortable with his generalist-comparative monograph, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, than with any of his other books because of its subject matter, which reflects close consultation with Mesopotamian specialists before writing the volume. Some of us might laud him for his unusually faithful reflections of archaeological interpretations in his specific case studies, particularly in contrast with other "public intellectuals" who have written about archaeology. One might, however, conclude that this 2017 publication is the least useful of all his works for archaeological theory precisely because he has reflected what we consider common knowledge effectively, rather than offering new ideas for archaeologists to apply to their case studies. There is no question that his previous works offer far more insights for interpreting the archaeological record for scholars like me, and the following section suggests that I am not alone in this belief.

How Archaeologists Have Used James Scott's Ideas

Any social scientist might argue that Scott's focus on domination and resistance in multiple forms aligns with work by archaeologists of many stripes, but it is primarily historical archaeologists and archaeologists who study state-level societies who have used some of his concepts directly, particularly in contexts of contact and colonialism (but see Singh and Glowacki 2022 for a late Pleistocene exception). His framework of private/public transcripts has been particularly fruitful for historical archaeologists, while both historical archaeologists and those who study ancient states have benefited from his focus on the emergence and maintenance of non-state spaces by subalterns. At the broadest level, archaeologists have focused on how documentary records offer evidence of resistance to colonial demands as in the 18th–19th century Outer Hebrides (Symonds 1999) or in skaldic/court poems and public documents crafted by the medieval elite of southern Scandinavia (Thurston 2007). A growing number of practitioners have also operationalized Scott's concepts using archaeological evidence.

One clear example of this lies in using material culture as two kinds of texts or, in Scott's terminology, transcripts. Using this approach, hidden transcripts counterbalance the documentary records produced by the state and can include the maintenance and even development of locally manufactured goods despite state pressure to acculturate. Where public transcripts can include architecture and even church seating in European colonies (Hall 2000: 31), hidden transcripts in the archaeological record may involve private spaces and their material contents in plantations (Ruppel et al. 2003), sloppily-decorated ceramics among colonial Pueblo societies (Spielmann et al. 2006), 17th-century clay pipes in Ireland (Hartnett 2004). Subjugated populations may be innovative by manufacturing new local ceramic wares (Zeitlin 2015) or continue to use traditional ceramics in the face of colonization, such as large steatite *ollas* (jars) and *comals* (griddles) among post-contact Chumash communities (Gamble 2015). Sixteenth-century local Irish chieftains assumed some trappings of their English overlords but continued to include tower houses based on traditional spatial grammars (Delle 1999).

Another concept that Scott introduced in describing forms of resistance might be termed "escape agriculture" (e.g., Walker 2022), a pattern that archaeologists can sometimes trace on physical landscapes. Distinguishing state vs. non-state/extra-state spaces has thus provided historical archaeologists with more useful tools. Some regions like the Great Dismal Swamp (Sayers 2014), large wetlands that straddle southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, were non-state spaces that offered refuge to self-emancipated Black and displaced Native peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries. Others were multicultural early 19th-century Maroon communities in the United States, as in Angola (Baram 2012). But archaeologists also suggest that 18th century enslaved people in Narragansett (Rhode Island) crafted their own non-state spaces, from houses owned by free blacks to wooded areas that were used as gathering places to maintain African cultural traditions like storytelling, dance, and ritual (Fitts 1996: 64). The Ifugao Archaeological Project's focus on this Philippine uplands region as a colonial refugium from Spanish domination efforts (Acabado 2018) is the only published Southeast Asian historical archaeological application of Scott's (2009) work – and draws direct parallels to the pattern he describes in mainland Southeast Asia to this island setting to the south.

James Scott's work has also contributed substantially to the broad intellectual currents that swirl around our fields, perhaps nowhere else so clearly as in the analytical scale and theoretical focus of archaeological research. Archaeologists' relatively recent embrace of "bottom-up" perspectives for understanding culture change includes

theoretical approaches like the "collective action" theory that draws from Scott's work (e.g., DeMarrais and Earle 2017) and applications to agrarian societies in ancient states (Erickson 2006: 348; Nichols 2015). Scott's focus on individual actors and small-scale interactions has also permeated our methodological focus, as practitioners of household archaeology credit him as one proponent of the microscalar approach (e.g., Robin 2003; Robin et al. 2014). Increasing numbers of archaeologists working on state-level societies who wish to challenge conventional Marxist interpretations cite Scott's work in studies of resistance in particular case studies of specific shatter zones (González-Ruibal 2014, drawing from Scott 2009) and more broadly to understand changing power relations in the archaeology of empire (Düring et al. 2020; see also Rosenzweig and Marston 2018: 90–91 for a recent review).

Although archaeologists who seek to understand the development of social stratification may learn new details as much from Scott's (2017) *Against the Grain* monograph, more of them benefit from his research on the nature and durability of state infrastructures and infrastructural power (Yoffee 2016). He specifically contended that early states were fragile, with limited control, and questioned the effective power of more recent (and perhaps even contemporary) states to effect change. Although relatively few colleagues have embraced Scott's anarchism full-throatedly (but see Angelbeck and Grier 2012), his work has played some part in the emerging archaeological interest in anarchism (e.g., Flexner and Gonzalez-Tennant 2018; Furholt et al. 2020). Whether couched in anarchist terms or offered as a case study, James Scott's work consistently illustrates the potential power of the bottom and the decidedly limited power of the top. This career-long sustained exploration into the contingent and fragile nature of institutional power, which must routinely negotiate resistance from agents within and beyond the polity, is perhaps the most useful scholarship for archaeologists who study ancient states.

Scott's (1998) central contention – that states seek power over their subordinates through simplification to make them "legible" – is one of his key theoretical contributions to archaeological theory: not because he is alone in suggesting this, but because he steps away from purely Marxist models in his framework. Drawing from Michael Mann's analysis of power, scholars agree that ancient states and empires depended on collaboration with local elites to naturalize power relations through strategies like inverting traditions and historical forgetting (Richardson 2016). So the very process of simplification or bureaucratization that made citizenry visible to the state also produced bottom-up resistance and infrastructural fragility (Pollock 2019: 704; Yoffee 2016, 2019: 2): generating complex and nonlinear histories of long-lived 'civilizations' characterized by the collapse and regeneration of a variety of early states, many of which were too weak to exercise effective power (Schwartz and Nichols 2006).

Excepting the previously mentioned Ifugao research on post-colonial "escape agriculture" and my work on the fragility of Angkorian states (Stark 2019b), few Southeast Asian archaeologists have used Scott's concepts to explain our archaeological patterning. One might, with some stretching, consider including Matthew Spriggs' Lapita case study (Furholt et al. 2020), which views the Remote Pacific as a kind of Zomia from Southeast Asia. What are we to make of this relative absence of James Scott from the archaeological literature of his source area? The fact that his work resonates most strongly with historical (rather than "prehistoric") archaeologists globally partly explains this absence, since few Southeast Asian archaeologists engage in historical archaeology as defined in the West. A growing handful of archaeologists work in Southeast Asia's earliest literate societies, but these predated Western contact by more than 1400 years and align more closely with South Asia's Early Historic period (Stark 2014). Remarkably few Southeast Asian archaeologists research post-16th century occupations (outside of "shipwreck archaeology"), where little theoretical work has developed, because most practitioners work in heritage management with limited opportunity to publish. Those who do are constrained by historiographic paradigms like royal chronicles that restrict interpretation in ways that resemble Chinese archaeological research (von Falkenhausen 1993). Western-originating historical archaeological concerns with contact and colonialism, therefore, have little resonance in Southeast Asian archaeological practice beyond the Philippines research noted previously (see Acabado and Hsieh 2020).

Another reason for this "Scott silence" in the archaeology of the very region where he worked might lie in the hegemony of Western paradigms in Southeast Asian archaeological research, producing a long-term focus on "prehistoric" rather than historic research (in which state dynamics can be studied). One might blame the region's spectacular early hominin finds as much as foreign researchers' embrace of Anglo-European conceptual frameworks, using Thailand as the basis for offering generalizations for regional developments (Shoocongdej 2011, 2017). Resistance to these culture history paradigms (which draw largely from now-disputed European models based on historical linguistics) has come both from the region's archaeologists (Kanjanajuntorn 2020) and from a small band of anthropological

archaeologists working in the region (e.g., Stark 2015; White 2017) for different but overlapping reasons that intersect over the need to view Southeast Asia's archaeological record on its own terms. Both Southeast Asian and foreign critiques of a Three Age system emanate not simply from a concern to decolonize the field, but also from an increasingly robust archaeological record that does not parallel trends found in the Western hemisphere. The field is changing rapidly as more Southeast Asians move into researching their past, and one change is in the number of scholars studying the region's ancient "historic" states in both the lowland and upland regions. Such work might well attract interest in Scott's concepts and provide his ideas with more historical depth.

James Scott's Contributions to Archaeological Thought

Jim Scott's ideas have permeated the public conversation and also archaeological discourse and affected both how scholars and the public talk and think about the past. This is clearest, of course, in his 2017 *Against the Grain* monograph. Throughout his career, however, he made an explicit commitment to making his key ideas accessible to a wider audience rather than remaining in the ivory tower to converse with different theorists (Gilman et al. 2014: 117). It was certainly his willingness to generalize about long-term social and political processes – which he chalked up to his positivist beginnings – that formed such a powerful tool for reaching an educated audience across the social sciences and humanities. That this same tendency frustrated many of his colleagues is clear from one prominent scholar's query, in a review of Scott's (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed*, "But how far is it real, and how far does it hang together?" (Brookfield 2011: 491).

Like many archaeologists, James Scott appreciated the need for generalizing models. He concentrated on broad similarities, despite critiques from his peers that his broad brush ran "roughshod over differences and specific conditions that others would consider essential" (Scott 1990: 22). Scott's effort to understand peasant societies was grounded in a fundamental objection to state forms that oppressed the individual and founded in the microscale of ethnography. His work has helped humanize the present and the past as a virtual palimpsest of everyday acts: not some Marxist historical dialectic of proletariat vs. bourgeoisie, but instead of farmers and merchants, artisans and individuals across the social spectrum. These agents did not engage consciously in class struggle and rarely resisted in public, but they regularly took steps to assert their will in the world and occasionally electrified the collective to create meaningful change. James Scott was a self-avowed anarchist who dedicated his *Domination and Arts of Resistance* (1990) to the Moorestown Friends' (Quaker) School that he attended as a youth. Some observers have characterized his work as "in the end, deeply romantic" (McClellan 2024), and archaeologists such as Tim Denham (2018: 265) have used his approach to argue for the resilience of small-scale community-based polities that required no overarching state to function.

James Scott was also, finally, a humanist who liked talking with and learning about people. He may not have agreed to interact with Southeast Asian colleagues who critiqued his (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed Book* in print (Dove 2011), but he was pleased to engage with archaeologists when the opportunity presented itself. Let me close with two personal examples. The first was the 2017 Getty Museum conference on State Fragility (that produced the Yoffee 2019 volume), where he took issue with some of our contentions – and our genial disagreements carried on throughout the sessions. The second lies in the (2019) *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* review section of his *Against the Grain* monograph, where he not only agreed to submit a response to our varied comments but also thanked us for the feedback, and concluded that "the best we can hope for is to make a rich contribution to the compost heap of scholarship so that those who plough these fields after us may have richer fertilizer" (Scott 2019: 717). May his work continue to reverberate through our field.

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