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THEORY TALK #38

JAMES SCOTT ON AGRICULTURE AS POLITICS, THE DANGER OF STANDARDIZATION AND NOT BEING GOVERNED

Theory Talks

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JAMES SCOTT ON AGRICULTURE AS POLITICS, THE DANGERS OF STANDARDIZATION AND NOT BEING GOVERNED

How are agriculture or foot-dragging the core of the political? What if messy villages and myriads of local measures are rational? Can the well-intentioned state we take for granted as our point of departure be just as shortsighted as we are? Sometimes International Relations (IR) and political science more generally get challenged in unexpected ways. The work of James C. Scott, Marxist inclined towards anarchism by conviction and something between agrarian specialist and political scientist in training, inspires many not only to reconsider what the realm of politics was about—but also makes resistance to state-driven schemes understandable—even for political scientists. As such, he helps political scientists seeing the state differently. In this comprehensive *Talk*, Scott—amongst others— gives a comprehensive overview of his ideas on 'the political'; engages the politics of political science; and explains why despite globalization the state is still very much alive.

What is, according to you, the biggest current challenge or principal debate in politically oriented social sciences? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

This is not a question I pose to myself often. About the only time I did was, however, some years ago. I don't know if you know about the Perestroika Movement in Political Science? Some time ago, an anonymous manifesto signed by Mr. Perestroika appeared. It started out with the observation that Benedict Anderson and I had never read the American Political Science Review, and it proceeded to ask why—arguing that perhaps this journal and the hegemonic organization that backed it were irrelevant and indeed inhibitive of progress. Now the Perestroika Movement connected with the European Post-Autistic Economics Movement, which propagates heterodox economics as a challenge to all-consuming mainstream neoclassical economics. I was on the Executive Council of the Political Science Association because they invited me as a result of the Perestroika insurgency, and that was the only time I got actively involved in trying to think about what political science ought to do. By and large, I do what I do and let the chips fall where they

may; I prefer not to spend my time in the methodological trenches of the fights are swirling around me.

As you can see, I haven't thought deeply about how political science ought to be reformed; but I do believe that in political science, the people who do have pretentions to 'scientificity' are actually very busy learning more and more about less and less. There is an experimental turn in political science, consisting of people conducting what they call 'natural experiments' and that are carefully organized the way a psychology experiment would be organized, with control groups and so on. But the questions they ask are so extraordinarily narrow! They imagine that you answer as many of these questions as possible and you are slowly constructing a kind of indestructible edifice of social science, while I think all you have then is a pile of bricks that doesn't add up to anything.

I am actually more impressed by people who make modest progress on questions of obvious importance than people who make decisive progress on questions that aren't usually worth even asking. I have always tried to focus my own work on the questions I saw as having an obvious importance, such as the origins of the state or the dynamics of power-relations, whether between the state and its population or in general. Two of my books (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance* and *Weapons of the Weak*), for instance, were efforts to understand power-relations in a micro-setting (rather than in a macro-setting). Today, we are interested in what the political conditions are of non-catastrophic macro-economic policy, and that indeed seems an important question to me. Not only social scientists, but laymen too, would recognize the difference between an important question and a trivial question.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking?

Before I began graduate school—a long time back—a friend of mine said: 'before you go to graduate school, you must read Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*.' I read it the summer before I went to graduate school, and I think it is, in some ways, the most important book I've ever read. The other book that greatly influenced me a great deal was E.P. Thomson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)—I can actually remember the chair I sat in when I read the whole hefty 1000 pages. This book digs into the naissance of the working class consciousness in the same period that Polanyi zooms into to describe the disembedding of the economy from society. Another book that influenced me was Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels*, because he pointed to forms of social banditry as political phenomena and should be understood as such in terms of methodology, where they are normally analyzed as something else.

Why do I like these scholars? They have taught me that it is an important contribution to the social sciences to bring in a novel concept that changes people's way of looking at things. You know these hand-held kaleidoscopes, that when you shake them, they change colors and show you a different world? All works that made an impact on me, had that effect on how I saw the world: if I look at the world through the kaleidoscope this author proposes, I see a fascinatingly different world, and understand things I didn't understand before.

Now in terms of real-world events that impacted me, the Vietnam War—going on while I took my first job working on South East Asia at the University of Wisconsin in 1967—was certainly one of them. I found myself in the midst of demonstrations and so forth, giving talks and lectures on that phenomenon. I also realized in that period, that I had done a boring dissertation, that sank without a trace. I decided about that time, that since peasants were the most numerous class in world history, it seemed to me that you could have a worthy life studying the peasantry. If

development is about anything, it ought to be about peasant livelihoods and the improvement of peasant lives more generally. They also stand at the origins of wars of national liberation, as the Vietnam War was for the Vietnamese. My book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* came directly out of the Vietnam War struggles—it was my effort to understand peasant rebellion.

What would a student need to become a skillful scholar or understand the world in a global way?

Here I have a definite opinion. We can assume, in the kind of trade-union sense of the word, that everyone who becomes a scholar is going to be trained in their specialties and disciplines, so I take that for granted. But what I'm fond of telling students these days, is that if 90% of your time is spent reading mainstream political science, sociology, anthropology, and if most of your time is spent talking to people who read the same stuff, then you are going to reproduce mainstream political science, sociology and anthropology. My idea is that if you were doing it right, at least half of the things that you should be reading would be things from outside of your discipline, as most interesting impulses come from the margins of a discipline or even externally. Interesting scholarship in social sciences arises when you see a foreign concept as applicable and adding something to your field. Now I give that advice as a theoretization of my practice. When I was working on *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, I read all the peasant novels I could get my hands on; all the oral histories; in short, as much as I could stuff from outside of political science. If you look at the works that have been influential historically, you can tell by the index or bibliography that the author has been reading a lot of things that are outside the normal range of standard, mainstream work.

But if you decide to do something broad and challenging, you'll face some difficulties and resistance from the established academic machine. Take Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, again one of those great works. This book was turned down six times by publishers, because specialists on each of the fields he covered had problems with the chapters about those subjects.

On the other hand: how important is it to publish articles? A colleague of mine reported how many people actually read academic articles—and the number on average was less then three. So the majority of article publishing is essentially a vast anti-politics machinery put together to help people get tenure, and that holds even for peer-reviewed articles. Professional advancement depends increasingly on a kind of audit system for number of peer-reviewed articles et cetera, a kind of mechanical system that is an anti-politics machine, an effort to avoid making qualitative judgments about how good something is. It is something particularly common to democracies, where you have to convince people you are objective, you're not playing favors, there are no qualitative judgments, and it's just comparing the numbers. So, if you are producing an article, and it's going to be read by three people, then why are you doing this in the first place? You should find another line of work, where you have a little impact on the world. If you're doing it to please the discipline looking over your shoulder, it's going to be alienated labor, and I fully grant it is more difficult to make your way if you want to do it otherwise. It's easy for me to say, because I came along at a time when there was this romance about the third world—anything on the third world was likely to get published. So I am conscious of the fact that life was easier for me than it is for students today. But on the other hand: unless you prefer a clerical nine-to-five job in which you put in your hours, you might as well be doing something exciting even if it's harder to sell.

You are an agrarian by training; yet all of your texts are decisively political. What's so political about agriculture? And what are the policy implications for state-making and development in the 3rd world?

This came to me in the middle of the Vietnam Wars, as people were fighting wars of national liberation. At that point, people began to see for the first time the Vietnamese peasant, the Algerian peasant, the Mexican peasant, as the carrier of the national soul. While it may have been incorrect, the idea was that the peasant as the ordinary Vietnamese stood for the Vietnamese nation in some way. That brought me to agriculture: if you wanted to understand insurrections in Vietnam, you had to understand peasants; and if you wanted to understand peasants, you had to understand things like land tenure, crops, and so forth. It has gone so far that I started out with political violence thirty-some years ago, and now I am studying the domestication of plants and animals!

I think that as the major way of sustenance, as the major resource over which people struggle—questions of land and irrigation water and food supply and famine—are at the very center of the history of political struggles. They are the elementary version of politics and that's why it seems to me that a concern with such issues as farming is directly and immediately a concern with politics.

Back to the 'modern, developed world': in Western Europe and the US, the agricultural section makes up typically 5% of the population. Yet they tend to be heavily overrepresented politically in respect to their demographic weight in many respects because of questions of rural policy, political districting, subsidies… Smallholders and petty bourgeoisie are very important for right-wing parties. They are protected and subsidized to a point where surpluses accumulate and we actually make it difficult for the Third World to export. In a truly neoclassical world, we wouldn't be subsidizing agriculture and we'd be getting most of our agricultural supplies from poor countries on the periphery of Europe and Latin America. Even in a place like India, which is industrializing and urbanizing rapidly, the fact is that the rural population and the people that live off of agriculture and related activities has never been higher than it is today—even though the proportion is declining, the population is growing at such a rate that this tendency can be marked.

Your book *Seeing like a state* (Google preview) focuses on legibility and standardization efforts for purposes of taxation and political order. Do you see the same principle hold for the establishment of commodities and markets and are the same 'interests' involved, or does the market philosophy require different inscriptions? In other words, what is the difference between legibility for commercial and state purposes, and, in the end, between market power and state power?

It seems to me that large-scale exchange and trade in any commodities at all require a certain level of standardization. Cronon's book *Nature's metropolis*, which is a kind of ecological history of Chicago, has a chapter on the futures market for grain. There exists a tremendous natural variety in the kind of corn, soya and wheat that were grown, but they all have to be sorted into two or three grades in the great granaries, and to be shipped abroad in huge cargo ships–the impetus to

standardize in the granaries found its way back to the landscape and diversity of the surroundings of Chicago, reducing the entire region to monocropping.

It's the same principle at work as I describe in *Seeing like a state* with regards to the *Normalbaum* in German scientific forestry. Agricultural commodities become standardized as they move and bulk in international trade. If you build a McDonalds or Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise, they tell you architecturally exactly how to construct it, you have to buy the equipment that is standardized, it all has to be placed in the same relationship to the other things in the floor plan, so it's all worked out in detail, and it is worked out in such detail to produce a standardized burger or standardized fried chicken. And because it is standardized, the person who comes from the corporate headquarters can come with a kind of checklist in which every place is more or less the same, and they can check on cleanliness, quality, productivity and conformity to the corporate standard. This is the kind of control over distance that is required for industrial purposes. In the end, what is the assembly line? It is an effort to standardize the unit of labor power. The processes are not so different for grain production, burgers, or cars—as are the effects on diversity. Contract farming is then an instance to adapt agriculture to post-Fordist conditions with a higher emphasis on demand.

You can be labeled as a critic of the modernizing project inherent in states. Can you give an example of a contemporary form of governing you do endorse or would promote?

The degree to which a planning process is inflected at every level by democratic processes—for all the messiness that it introduces—seems to me to lead in the long run to more satisfactory outcomes for everybody concerned, and it also results in the kind of commitment to the results in which people felt that they had an adequate part in shaping. Examples are rife of successfully designed plans thought up from above, that fail because the people for whom this planning was designed, have had no stake in it. I don't want to get rid of the modernization project, I just want to tame the rule of experts.

I remember that I was in Berlin at the Wissenschaftskolleg, and there was a woman**,** Barbara Lane, there who was an architectural historian. We went to a housing area, where two types of *Seidlungen* or housing were to be found together: Bauhaus housings and a competing housing project by National Socialist architects. It was interesting to me, that the Bauhaus architects had figured out exactly how many square meters people needed, how much water they needed, how much sunlight, playground space… They had planned for an abstract human being; and the architecture could have been executed anywhere in the world. Whereas the Nazi architects had build genuine homes, with little chimneys, small front steps in brick—all these references to vernacular architecture that was part of the German cultural tradition. I realized that in a sense, the international aspiration of the Bauhaus school was to be placeless and universal, as IKEA does now. I found myself a little embarrassed that I would rather have lived in a dwelling designed by the Nazis than a Bauhaus home, but it does illustrate my point of governing: how is it executed? With what level of ambition in mind?

In that vein, your work is cited as a big inspiration to something called resistance studies, which aim to promote the interests of the subaltern/repressed, exactly those who you give a voice, face, and comprehensible outlook. What is your take on such emancipatory resistance studies?

All I have done in books such as *Weapons of the Weak* is to consider behavior we commonly label 'apolitical' or 'irrational' as forms of politics that were previously not given the dignity of considering them consciously political. For most of the world most of the time, the possibility of publicly assembling, creating organizations, having demonstrations, creating open democratic processes simply does not exist. The late (great) Charles Tilly and I disagreed about this. For him to consider something a political movement it had to have a durable public presence and have large public goals. I, on the other hand, tried to identify a zone of political action where it was considered inexistent before. About all these situations in which a formal and restricted definition of politics does not apply, I simply asked the question: 'What happens if we consider this politics?' And in fact foot-dragging, not complying, and other such tactics that people deploy when faced with brutal or authoritarian power, are often the only political tools available for the most of the world's population for most of the world's history.

It is powerful institutions that have most to conceal about the operations of power and about how the world actually works. I thought that the emancipatory potential of social science was actually simply doing your work honestly, showing how things really operate, that this would always have a subversive effect because it was the powerful institutions that had the most to hide and conceal. Good social science, I thought, would by its nature be emancipatory and have a kind of resistance function. I have less confidence nowadays about the motives of people who want to unearth how things work; they bring their own powerful prejudices to bear, and their motives are not always motives I find worthy.

How important is Marxism for you in explaining how the world works?

When I used to be asked about my relation to Marxism I used to say that I'm a crude Marxist, with the emphasis on 'crude', in the sense that I look at the material basis of any political struggle, and I think class and material basis are the best points of departure for analysis. And what I add to that—and that's why I was so taken with Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation*—is that it seems to me a powerful argument about the way the economy was embedded historically in other social relations and could not be extracted from it until the early 19th century when the *laissez-faire* ideology was elaborated. The struggle that Polanyi points to is a struggle that we're still engaged in, and certainly after the Washington Consensus we're going to have to invent forms of social protection of the kind Polanyi talked about. Whether we call them socialism or not, it is the kind of self-defense of people's life chances and subsistence. How to protect ordinary human beings against market excesses is a classical socialist question still very much to the fore.

In a strange way, I find myself nostalgic for the Cold War, in two senses. First, I think you could argue, as my colleague Roger Smith argued, if you want to understand the success of the civil rights movement in the US, one major reason during the Kennedy era was the fact that the US

was losing the Cold War in part—they thought—because of the fact that we were a racist society. So winning the Cold War became premised upon reforms I fully endorsed, to make society more equitable. Secondly, when it was a bipolar world, the US and the West were interested in land reform in places where the land distribution was wildly unequal. After 1989, the IMF and the World Bank have never talked about land reform again.

So while the mechanical teleological Marxist class struggle discourse has simply been proven wrong historically, the Polanyi kind of socialist questions are all alive and well.

In your latest book, you argue that we're witnessing a definitive expansion and entrenchment of the nation-state over the globe, a sort of final enclosure and you mention liberal political economy as a constraint on high modernist aspirations that can lead to catastrophe. But according to many contemporary observers, this would be contested, with rather the market expanding excessively, which ought to be curbed by states.

I note somewhere in *Seeing like a state* that the French trade unions were defending social security and the safety net in France against a set of liberal policies of the IMF and the World Bank, and in that respect, the nation-state was one of the few obstacles against markets. Henry Bernstein reminds me every time I argue against the state that it is the only institution that stands between the global liberal economy and the individual or the family.

But in most of the world, the third world anyway, the effective leaver of the world economy has been the state; and often, it is the state that is then checked by a liberal appeal to private space which the expansive state cannot appropriate and regulate.

We might agree that the more truly democratic a state is, which means minimizing the distortion of structural advantages in the accumulation of wealth and property, the degree to which those distortions of wealth, power and property are curbed by the state, indicate the extent to which a state can become something that restrains the completely unimpeded operation of the market. The only state that is likely in the long run to serve as a vehicle for the self-protection of citizens against market failures is a democratic system that is open enough and that negates, mediates or minimizes the structural advantages of concentrations of power, property and wealth.

What is neoliberalism in your definition?

In a sense, the pervasiveness of neoliberal ways of talking has the effect of turning people into calculators of advantages. There is this book, *Everything I learned about love I learned in business school*, and it's about 'cutting your losses', about having a 'mission statement', about 'measuring performance'… In a curious way, in terms of classical political economy, Hobbes thought we needed a state to restrain our appetites, and it may be that the neoliberal state has so colonized our way of decision-making (stimulating our appetites), that the neoliberal state has in fact created the human actor that now *does* have to be restrained by the state.

In your last book, *The art of not being governed* (Google preview), your focus is on places and peoples in South-East Asia that were reluctant to be incorporated into the nation-state system. It is a historical book; does it, despite of that, have any lessons for the present?
Next to what I mentioned earlier about recognizing the choice not to be incorporated into the state as a consciously evasive political choice, I would argue that since the Second World War, these place have been incorporated into the nation-state, albeit not everywhere and unevenly. We need to invent ways of association and cooperation across state boundaries and forms of limited sovereignty like Catalonia. The only alternative today is somehow taming this nation-state, because it can't be held at bay—it is increasingly usurping these frontier regions—the movie Avatar, which pretends you *can* burn bridges and keep 'modernity' away is simply utopian. So I think the task for indigenous peoples is to somehow slow down and domesticate the advance of the nation-state in ways that will make their absorption more humane.

You stated earlier you are a 'crude Marxist', yet in your recent book you adopt a constructionist take on collective identity, by showing how easily social formations can change. If the material basis is so important, what do you mean with constructionism?

The number of things that can function as markers of distinctive identities. If you think about the potential commonalities that groups of people share, any one or any combination of these commonalities can be made the basis for an identity. In South-East Asia, some people bury their dead in jars; they can choose to take that as a boundary sign confirming some sort of group identity; then, all of a sudden, social mobilization occurs on the basis of the way in which the dead are buried—those who bury them in jars *versus* those who don't. The question is always: which of these almost endless series of cultural or economic features are the bases for social mobilization? There are material conditions; if in fact a whole series of small landholders all find themselves subject to the same conditions of debt and if there's an economic crisis and they're all losing their land at the same time, then it is likely that this kind of pain will crystallize itself as a peasant movement for the reduction of debt. The same goes, of course, for mobilizing French farmers who suffer from the same European regulations; whereas they support different local soccer teams and as such have little in common, when a new regulation targets their industry, they'll mobilize around that material fact. On the other hand, you can get poor farmers in Michigan, as in the Michigan militias, who decide to mobilize around the fact that the government is the enemy of poor white people.

It seems to me that some features are more likely to serve as the point of crystallization around which group identities will rally, but there is no way of predicting which one it will be in a given situation.

Your last book in a way makes an argument similar to that of Rousseau, namely, that outside the state, there is not anarchy but also—and consciously different—political order. What do you think of the philosophical idea of the 'state of nature', which by

realists in international relations is extrapolated into the unsafe anarchy that 'surrounds' states?

My answer would be a historical one. The state, or centralized political organization, has been with us for the last 4000 years. Even when this state was not all-pervasive or all-powerful everywhere, it was always there. So even if certain spaces or people were 'outside' the state—in the so-called state of nature—they always coexisted with the state and interacted with it dialectically. So saying that there are people living inside and with the state, and others outside and without it, and that supposedly they will behave completely different, is a difficult hypothetical. I have, for instance, the idea that life was *not* 'brutish, nasty and short' outside of the state as Hobbes argued, partly because the population levels were so low that the way of dealing with conflict was simply moving out of the way. A lot of the things people struggled and died over, were essentially commodities. So if by the state of nature we mean people living outside the state in a world in which states already exist so they are at the periphery of states, then this is a completely different thing. We know, for instance, that pastoralism is in fact always organized in order to trade with agrarian states; it is not some previous form of subsistence that is superseded by agriculture. Another example: in the 9th century the people in Borneo were considered to be very backward and they were a typical example of a hunting and gathering society. What were they gathering? Certain kinds of feathers and resins and the gall bladders of monkeys, all stuff hugely valuable in *China* at the time! So they were gathering these things for international trade with an already existing state; their hunting and gathering is a hunting and gathering performed in the shadow of states. So which 'state of nature' are we referring to? When Rousseau speaks of the savages he has met, he sees people that strategically respond to representatives of an organized state, pursuing their interests and behaving politically. So the concept, perhaps, hides more than it reveals.

James Scott is Professor of Political Science and Professor of Anthropology at Yale and is Director of the Agrarian Studies Program. His research concerns political economy, comparative agrarian societies, theories of hegemony and resistance, peasant politics, revolution, Southeast Asia, theories of class relations and anarchism.

Related links

- Faculty Profile at Yale
- Read the Introduction of *Seeing Like a State* (1998) here (pdf)
- Video in which James Scott tells the story of *The art of not being governed* at Cornell