

James C. Scott (1936–2024)

An inspiration to anarchists

Sylvie Kashdan

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The anthropologist James Campbell Scott, who passed away on July 19, 2024, approached the world from an egalitarian perspective. While not identifying as an anarchist, he brought an anarchistic sensibility to his study of the dynamics of power relations and the varied ways peoples have resisted authority in the past and present.



While teaching at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) and Yale University, Scott combined ethnography, history, and politics and developed criticisms of much of industrial capitalist society.

As a young academic in the 1960s, Scott hoped for a revolution to banish the old, toxic ways of life and remake relations among people and between humans and the natural world.

In a 2017 interview, he tells us,

“I started teaching during the Vietnam War, and I was a South-East Asia specialist. I was one of those left-wing people in love with the wars of national liberation, and of course that’s why I did this book called *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976), to try and understand how peasant revolutions happened.”

Scott’s research for the book, including field work in Asia, forced him to think about rebellion and social transformation in radical new ways, close to the understandings of some anarchists. He realized that peasants who were active participants in revolutionary movements were not necessarily ideologically converted to the goals of political leaders and their new governments. Scott recognized that often, “Peasants make revolutions because they want a little piece of land. They want to get out from under, let’s say debt, sharecropping debt, and so on.” They desire control over their own lives.

He also realized that once the old order was overthrown, revolutionary leaders generally refused to allow the ordinary people the freedoms and peace for which they had fought.

“Sékou Touré, Kwame Nkrumah, Ho Chi Minh, not to mention Lenin and Trotsky and Mao, that when there was an actual revolution, it was often the case that they created a stronger state that was able to fasten itself on its people and govern their lives more brutally in many ways than the ancien régime, not actually improving the freedom and autonomy of much of the population.”

Scott deepened his critique of authority and expanded it in space and time. He was excited to find people who defied established states and could be understood as examples of how resistance to authorities was possible.

He joined the growing number of anthropologists, including Marshall Sahlins, Jared Diamond, and Pierre Clastres, challenging the mainstream idea that hierarchy and domination were inherent in the nature of humans. As they became more familiar with the existence of small decentralized social groupings from the past and of currently existing non-state peoples, these radical anthropologists discovered compelling evidence that people lived healthier, happier and safer lives outside densely populated state-dominated centers.

Scott and others also came to reject the idea that human social organization must follow a one-way road from small, isolated hunter-gatherer bands, maturing through specific social stages into state society.

During the 1960s and 1970s, movements among indigenous peoples were growing and many anarchists were learning to respect their understanding of the world in non-formulaic ways. At the same time, Scott and other anthropologists began to recognize that current societies of traditional indigenous peoples are not simply social remnants of the past. In many ways, current indigenous cultures can be understood as having developed to resist the incursion of state socialization. They are part of struggles against the invasion and degradation of their physical and social environments—ways of resisting slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.

One of Scott’s main contributions to liberatory thought and practice was his re-writing of the role played by groups subordinated to or threatened by state control, “non-state people” as he termed them. He found and documented a dynamic, adversarial relationship between freedom-seeking people on the fringes and those who live in centralized, state-controlled societies.

In his books, including *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2010), and *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017), Scott utilized recent archaeological and anthropological evidence to explain the intimate connections between the waging of war, slavery, and state formation, as well as the multifaceted relationships between monoculture, writing, and the domestication of human subjects.

In *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (2012), Scott identified himself as a “mediocre part-time farmer and beekeeper,” whose scholarly work is written through what he designated as “an anarchist squint.” He said that “if you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle. It will also become apparent that anarchist principles are active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism or anarchist philosophy.”

Scott also expressed his appreciation for anarchistic perspectives as a Sustainer of this magazine.

His research helped strengthen the understanding that the contemporary civilized capitalist state system was never inevitable or pre-determined by some imaginary evolutionary law. Even as the horrors of today surround

us, Scott helps us to remember that we have the ability to engage in direct action because we are all constantly presented with opportunities to choose between enslavement and freedom, and anything can happen!

James C. Scott will be greatly missed, but his contributions to free thought and action will continue to inform and inspire rebels now and in the future.

Sylvie Kashdan, a long-time friend of the *Fifth Estate* and part of the editorial collective, lives on Northwest Turtle Island.

Related

- Golden Age of the Barbarians by James C. Scott, FE #399, Fall, 2017
- The Art of Not Being Governed, review by Peter Lamborn Wilson, FE #382, Spring, 2010

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