James C. Scott

Decoding subaltern politics. Ideology, disguise and resistance in agrarian politics.


Most of the first part of Decoding Subaltern Politics illustrates why many regard James Scott as a first class theoretician. Both reflexive and highly analytical, this book grew out of Scott’s four decades of distinguished work thinking about peasant societies, ranging from his early years in the 1960s as a young teacher who sincerely (if also naïvely, as he himself has said) believed in peasant revolutions, to an established and philosophical thinker considering such things as the disappearance of land reform from the World Bank agenda after the Berlin Wall fell and its wider ramifications for peasant societies around the globe. Many scholars who write a notable first book do not continue produce work of the same caliber. Those who succeed sometimes change theoretical orientation, morphing from material to structural analysis as the academic winds shift, and so on. Scholars who maintain theoretical perspectives while sharpening their analysis throughout their career are rare. Decoding Subaltern Politics further confirms James Scott as part of that exceptional group.

In his previous works, Scott argued that the peasant experience is filled with everyday resistance, exploring the often subtle, myriad ways they negotiate their lives in relation to power, tradition, and land, as well as formal and informal institutions. Yet although it’s pervasive, ‘everyday resistance’ does not take place every day, nor are such acts typically emblazoned and announced. Most of the time such complex and ambiguous relations between great and small traditions, or between the ruled and the ruling classes, exist betwixt and between, quietly but significantly. Scott offers the concept of ‘negotiated subordination’ to shed light on this situation. Peasants are only willing to be ruled as long the rulers fulfill certain condition—whether implicitly in folk tales or openly in a constitution. For instance, after the death of Soeharto’s wife, Javanese started to grumble that the president could no longer satisfy peoples’ desire for economic justice, and was losing his ‘wahyu’ or divine mandate—therefore it was alright for people to topple him from power. With negotiated subordination Scott elucidates a pyramid of social relations between peasants and the ruling class, placing costly rebellion at the top, such things as tense skirmishes, foot dragging, avoidance, and petty stealing in the middle, and ordinary, habitual subordination at the bottom.

Doggedly pursuing the idea of moral economy (which undergirds ‘negotiated subordination’ and other related concepts) has pitfalls. To some extent,
when Scott enters the area of politics and religion, he repeats his own 1980s work about *zakat*, Islamic tithe, among farmers of Kedah. Yet convincingly, Scott argues that like any other social field, religion is a contested arena between, on one side, elites, ruling literates, the people of great tradition; and on the other, rural cultivators, peasants, the ruled illiterates, the people of small tradition. There is no such thing as a unified ideology, but remarkably, Scott uncovers cross-cultural patterns that suggest consistent ways that peasants demonstrate agency in wide-ranging cultural and historical realms. These patterns reflect richly ambiguous responses to power. Regardless of the name or title of the figure, for example, the rural masses always seem to find a ‘high priest’ figure, which can lead to strikingly different actions; in other words, the structural patterns of religion can be wily, both encouraging and discouraging resistance. In Scott’s words, ‘[i]f theology could be used to validate the secular order, popular religion, in the guise of millenarian expectations, could be used to delegitimize that order’ (p. 49).

Scott’s peasant resistance has become a general theory. From breaking wind behind a prince’s back to poaching the queen’s geese, from a belief in the Second Coming to deflection of a party’s policies by village cadres, from the all male folk drama, *ludrug* to the *nat* possession ritual where people in trance shout ‘There is no Buddha’, almost any movement or action among oppressed peasant and rural populations can be explained in terms of peasant resistance. Although ruling elites always try to dominate, Scott argues ‘there is no such thing as a perfect hegemony […], the growth of oppression dialectically produces its own negation in the symbolic and religious life of the oppressed’ (p. 61). But in order to grasp this ‘dialectic’, one must study not only a great tradition’s written sources but also, and especially, its ‘shadow history’.

Reading *Decoding Subaltern Politics* recharges our mental energy and exposes for critical and theoretical consideration previously unknown or unconsidered territory in peasant studies: ‘Terima kasih Pak Jim’. While there is much to admire here, I do have two criticisms.

A persuasive and well-argued general theory, like an effective generic medicine, runs the risk of being over-prescribed. Or to use another metaphor, one-size-fits-all garments don’t look good on everyone. Scott’s suggestion to do ‘shadow history’ may lead to repetition, and if applied too broadly, his meticulously constructed resistance theory could lose its analytical rigor. Consider the following example. The rapid expansion of palm oil cultivation in West Kalimantan, from virtually zero to almost half million hectares between 1980 and 2010 has inspired moral panics among local farmers (Dayak and Malays). According to such rumors, kidnappers roam the country side looking for vic-