

# A WONDERING, WANDERING SOCIAL SCIENTIST

James C. Scott

I don't think there's much for me to say. I think Richard just summed up what I've been at, and it's certainly true that I'm a contrarian. To give you a small example, whenever I sign something these days, instead of putting "emeritus," I put "demeritus." I tried to actually have a blurb which described me as professor "demeritus" on a Princeton University book, and the author declined to have me use this. And so, I haven't been able to use it publicly, but I find that behind every label there's a critique of a generalization that ought to be questioned.

I wanted to say a few words about how I stumbled into my academic career. I'm described as a political scientist and a Southeast Asianist, and both of these things were pure random chance, and I mean pure random chance. I was an undergraduate at Williams in economics, and I was supposed to study under a great economist who didn't publish much but was famous, Emil Dépré. He sicced me on the problem of German wartime mobilization because it turned out that Germany had the workforce in the early parts of the war but did not have double or triple shifts. My job was to figure out why they didn't mobilize the labor that they had. In any case, I had worked like a crazy man at Williams because I thought I was the stupidest person there, and after three years, I finally relaxed and thought, oh, I guess I belong, to the point where I fell in love and didn't do any work on my thesis in the first semester. My professor called me in, and I tried to fake it, and he said you haven't done anything. Get out of here. You're not going to be my honor student. And I realized that if I wanted to graduate from honors in economics, I was going to have to find another economist to adopt me. And so I walked down the hall and knocked on the doors of all the economists. I think the third office I came to was of a man named William Hollinger, who'd

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worked on Indonesia, and he said, “You know, I’ve always wanted to learn something about the economic development of Burma. If you’ll do that, I will adopt you.” And I said, “Fine.” I closed the door and left and said to myself, where’s Burma? I knew it was in southeast Asia somewhere, but I didn’t know exactly where, and I was otherwise headed to Harvard Law School, like every other idiot. I applied on a whim for a Rotary Fellowship and got it, and I thought, “I can always go to law school. When am I going to go to Burma?” So I went to Burma for a year, and that’s how come I’m a Southeast Asianist. If he had said Brazil or Togo or Cameroon, I would have had a completely different area specialty. The second step is that I applied to the Yale economics department. I was accepted, and Jim Tobin was chairman then, and he said I had to have my second year of calculus before I came, and I’d had a first year of calculus. I hadn’t had much problem with mathematics. I said I had a chance to join a trade union delegation to North Africa as a part of my political activities, and I wanted desperately to do that—to go to Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria—and I said, let me add calculus in my first semester. He said no. I appealed, and they said no. And I said, well, why don’t you send all my papers over to the political science department and see if they’ll have me? He did, and they would have me, so that’s why I’m a political scientist.

As a Southeast Asianist and as a political scientist, it was a completely random set of billiard balls on the table that knocked me into it. I don’t regret it, but it’s not as if this was a linear decision, a purposeful effort, to map a career. I stumbled into it and fell in love with it. There are only two things that I can claim that grounded me. One of them was that I, from second grade to high school graduation, went to a tiny little Quaker country day school in New Jersey near Philadelphia called Moorestown Friends School. I was part of its biggest graduating class in its history, which was twenty-five people. Two things impressed me about the Quakers, and I was not brought up in a Quaker family at all. I was brought up by atheists. One of them is that I encountered, quite frequently, Second World War conscientious objectors that I didn’t agree with. They had gone to prison for the entirety of the Second World War, volunteered for medical experiments to show their patriotism, and so on. And whatever my disagreements with them politically, I found myself in tremendous admiration for their courage and persistence and dignity. The other thing this little school did, which a public school could not do, I don’t think, although this was voluntary, was hold week-long work camps in Philadelphia, where we would spend a week with kids from other Quaker schools living in a church basement. We would, let’s say, help paint a Black family’s apartment that they’d just moved into. We went to Father Divine’s for dinner. We went to settlement houses. We went to communist dock-worker meetings in Philadelphia. We went to Moyamensing Prison. We went to Byberry Mental Institution. That is to say, I got in the course of a week, a sense for the underbelly of Philadelphia that most people who grew up in Philadelphia, in fairly comfortable surroundings, would never have, and it stayed with me forever. That included a week-long work camp in Washington, DC, where these little Quakers walked into the Russian embassy—this was 1953—to have an interview with a consular official who

clearly thought the Quakers were a curious, crazy group of people. An elderly Quaker woman was in charge of us, and we had this interview with a consular official from the Russian embassy. The subject came up, as it would with Quakers, about nuclear disarmament. He said, "You know, we don't want nuclear weapons. If everybody got rid of the nuclear weapons, we would get rid of them, too." She responded, in her Quaker-ish way—I think she was wearing tennis sneakers—"Then thee means to be the last good man in the world." And I thought, wow, these people have a kind of insight into the rhetoric. Although they were laughing at her, she had her finger on their pulse, as it were.

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The other thing that I did decide when I was in my first job at the University of Wisconsin was to give a course with a friend who was a Chinese specialist on theories of peasant revolution in an effort to understand wars of national liberation based on the peasantry. It was the period of the Vietnam War, and I was a Southeast Asianist and gave lots of talks against the Vietnam War. This was the period of the Dow demonstrations, and the campus was closed down for the Cambodian spring. We had six hundred students, and there were fifty or sixty students that regarded my colleague and me as insufficiently progressive. After every lecture, they would go and write a critique of the lecture and hand it out in mimeographed sheets at the next class. It was an experience of intensive learning, and I decided in the middle of all of this that I wanted to devote my career to understanding peasants—peasants being the largest class in world history. And if development didn't mean something for peasants, then to hell with development. And so, I decided to become a *peasantist*. I think from that point I became not a member of a discipline, but someone devoted to reading all the literature on peasants, and that meant folklore, Balzac's *Les Paysans*, Zola's *La Terre*, and all the anthropology on peasants. I became a peasantist and have remained a kind of peasantist and somehow was dissuaded from calling Yale's program the Yale Peasant Program, to calling it Agrarian Studies, which allows us to go back to latifundia and Rome and so on. It was a much better title, actually, than the one that I had chosen.

I want to say some things, rather than recapitulate my work, which I'm unable to do anyway, about my critique of social science. First of all, it's a critique of political science and sociology, I suppose, as you indicated. Political scientists are likely to go, if they go to a village at all, which is unlikely, with a questionnaire in which they've figured out the options that are available, and they'll do the interpretation of the survey right there and move in and out fairly quickly. Possible outcomes have already been predetermined by the structure of the questionnaire. It seemed to me, and the thing that appealed to me once I decided to become a peasantist was that I had to spend a year-and-a-half or two in an actual peasant village. If I was going to talk about peasants, I had to have some sense, somewhere, of having lived in a peasant village, and it was a rice farming village of seventy families in Malaysia.

For me, the attraction of anthropology is where all social science should begin. That is to say, if you want to understand why a group of people are doing what they do, then the first thing you must do is to ask them for the best explanation they have

for what they're up to. It doesn't mean they're not misled, and it doesn't mean that they have a correct view of the world. You can't necessarily take it at face value, but if you don't start with their description of what they think they're doing, then this is social science behind people's back, and that's inadmissible as social science. It's where social science, I think, has to begin, and most social science does not begin there. In that sense, the wide-eyed, soak-and-poke of anthropology is trying to be as close as you can to a fly on the wall and not be the stimulus, in a sense, for their answers but rather to listen to their dialog, to understand their situation, and to try to make sense of it over time. And so it seems to me that anthropologists may not end up where I'd like them to end up all the time, but they begin exactly where I think most social science should begin, and very little social science does begin there.

Another critique I have of social science is its sense of time, and this is perhaps a consequence of the most recent book I published called *Against the Grain*, which is about how we came to live in great heaps of domesticated animals as human beings 6,000 years BC in the Mesopotamian Alluvium. It was a sort of completely new departure for me, but it was an effort to understand the first agrarian states that are the basis of how we lived until the industrial revolution, basically, as sedentary agriculturalists. Understanding that procedure made me an anthropologist with envy for history in that respect and appreciation of how the question of time is important. I think, as homo sapiens, our default unit of time is a human lifetime. Because that's us, if you like, or at most, our parents and our children – three generations. And it seems to me that depending on what it is you're studying, the question of time should vary greatly. If you're studying tectonic plates, of course, you're talking about vast periods of time. Since I'm doing a book on rivers and the history of rivers, I think in terms of things like river time, and so it seems to me that the units of time ought to be calibrated to the kinds of problems that you're solving, and for most problems, I think we realize that, particularly now in terms of environmental history, that the default unit of the human lifetime is inadequate for most of the big questions we want to ask about the environment and where we're headed, and global climate change, and so on. Of course, most social science is very presentist as well and concentrated on most institutions in the West, and the West, essentially since the industrial revolution and the democratic revolutions, beginning with the American and French.

Finally, I think our sense of space is also often wrong for many of the questions we want to ask. After the Treaty of Westphalia, in 1648, we tend to think spatially in terms of the political units and the states that were formed since then. Again, for a tremendous number of questions we want to ask, those states and their borders make no sense at all. One of my favorite little poems is from a Swiss poet I got to know. The first line is "No cow knows it's in Switzerland," and I thought, given the iconic value of the Swiss cow, it was a very nice way to begin a poem in that respect. I found myself interested, let's say, not just in rivers, but also the whole upland area of Southeast Asia, the mountainous area above roughly 250 meters, which covers northern Burma,

northern Thailand, almost all of Laos, little parts of Cambodia, southwestern China, and so on. And it is no respecter of national borders. There is a Dutch geographer who wants to call this Zomia, which means “far from the center” in Mizoram languages, and the point is that this is a zone that pays no respect to borders, because it is, if you like, an environmental zone, a geographical zone, and it happens to be that area to which people fleeing the state have gravitated over long periods of time. The reason it’s so complicated historically and is called, in another context, a shattered zone is because there are so many languages and cultures that it’s almost impossible to figure out, and it’s because it is, if you like, a refugee center for people who have historically fled conscription, famine, taxes, and state control. One could say the same not of highland areas but of marshy and swampy areas. There were, at the beginning of the Civil War, six thousand runaway slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp on the North Carolina–Virginia border. These were people who didn’t make it to the North or to Canada and who ended up in the swamp. Some of them had lived there for three generations and never seen a white person. The Marsh Arabs would also be a good example. There are tons and tons of examples of low-lying, marshy areas, and the Pripet marshes on the Polish–Ukrainian border are another example. These happen to be areas that often span several countries, and their importance is an ecological and environmental importance, and they allow certain forms of what I would call escape agriculture or nonagricultural pursuits. I find that the effort to divide the world into Westphalian states may make sense, of course, if you’re interested in the local politics and institutions and congresses and senates and presidents, and so on. But for a lot of the questions that are most important, the question of the boundaries of the nation state makes no sense. In parts of the, if you like, post-imperial world where lines were drawn without even a surveyor, just sort of straight on the map in parts of Africa and in Southeast Asia, they make no sense at all. And of course, people ignore them entirely.

I can’t resist another observation of all those people knocking on the doors of American borders. If the unit factors of production and neoclassical dynamics are land, labor, and capital, capital can move at the push of a button from here to Hong Kong to Brasilia to wherever instantly. And all those people who are crossing the Mediterranean, trying to cross national borders, that is the factor of production called “labor” seeking its highest return just the way capital does. It manifests itself in these clogged borders in which the same kind of movement—there’s a level of friction and resistance that doesn’t allow them to act as free moving form factors in production that can seek their highest return—in the same way, when we think of zones that don’t respect borders. Think, let’s say, in Europe of what Paul Freedman and others describe as the butter-olive oil line, below which people cook with olive oil, above which they cook with butter. There’s a sort of beer-wine line, you could say. There’s a line where people have their main meal in the evening as opposed to midday, and so on.

The last thing I want to say is, and I think if I ever put this together, it amounts to a trashing of most social science, if I may say so. That is the way in which we privilege

written history and archives over oral history. Writing only came to us relatively recently, and in the Mesopotamian language it did not represent speech. It was essentially accounting for taxes and so on. The representation of speech or hymns or official transcripts comes quite late, and written language comes much later in the human history of 200,000 years, so the last tiny little fraction. And all of those things that end up in the archives, because they're on paper and permanent and fixed and don't change, seem to us to be the most convincing evidence we could possibly have. But they were produced at a particular time for a particular purpose, to persuade someone to mask something, to disguise something, to excuse something—taxes, whatever you have. They are no more reliable than oral histories passed on by bards over time in which each bard memorizes what a bard had said previously.

I'll end with an example of something I've never written up about a group in Burma called the Pa-O. I walked with my translator into the Pa-O hills for several days, and nobody is literate in this part of the hills. After an evening meal, someone in the village said, why don't we entertain me and my tutor with the local village bards, who would come and tell the history of the Pa-O. They came, these elderly men—and as long as they were fed and given something to drink—and went on for three-and-a-half or four hours. I didn't speak Pa-O, and my Burmese was weak then, too. Later on we recorded and translated. I expected you'd have flying heroes who changed the landscape or brought the Pa-O here, and tales of heroism like the great Yu in Chinese folklore who prevented floods and brought agriculture. And it was not that at all. It was completely uncharismatic. It read like a police report, and it was meant to be read like a police report. It was the history of the Pa-O hero who was the first person elected to the parliament from the Pa-O ethnic group. He was murdered, and his murder has never been solved. The entire four hours was so-and-so came in a green sarong wearing a white shirt and had a jeep with the following license plate and three friends, went back home to see his family, took a shower, stayed on the porch, and talked to the following six people. It went on and on and on. In the end, it also described how his body was found, the rings that he was wearing, the clothes that he was wearing, the rocks that had been placed on top of him to hide his body, the exact time that this occurred, and who discovered the body. I realized that what these people were doing was preserving the material evidence in case the police or the state ever came to try to solve this. At the end they said, please memorize this and pass it on without distorting it at all. Here was, in a sense, an extraordinary effort to preserve the material evidence of a crime, the way a police report might that had nothing particularly charismatic or magical about it. It's a completely oral approach, and it has never been written down. I don't quite understand why it's told at weddings and funerals. It seems to me a police report is the last thing one would like to listen to at a funeral or a wedding, but it was to me an example of the continuity of oral history. The great thing for states and institutions about written history is that once it's fixed, it's like a biblical text. You can then measure deviations from subsequent versions from the original because you've got a

fixed original, and it is true that oral history can slide and drop certain aspects of the story over time and embellish other versions of the story. I can think of no convincing reason why we should take oral history any less seriously than we take a written history.

If you abolish our ideas of space and time and make sure you get the actual account of people who are trying to explain what it is they're doing and make an abstraction of Westphalian states for intervention and take oral history as seriously as we take written history, we'd have a very different social science on our hands. I have no expectation that this will happen, but I wish it would. That's aspiration. Thanks a lot.