James Scott says he cannot stop writing books, long books; but each one says something distinctive and adds significantly to our knowledge about politics in places, here and there, making the strange familiar while putting the familiar in a new light.¹ We might be tempted to place his writings in a category like, say, comparative politics, Southeast Asian studies, or even something exotic like subaltern studies. Doing so, however, would be a mistake. While most of his work has come from sustained examination of the coping practices of ordinary people in Southeast Asia,² Scott has written extensively and insightfully on how, more generally, subordinated populations resist centralized power.³ His latest book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, perhaps best exemplifies how Scott’s approach not

³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) and *Seeing Like a State* are examples of Scott’s writings that pursue a more generalized analysis of how the subordinated resist oppression by political authorities.
only teaches us much about the oppressed but also offers inspiration for other social scientists who seek to do good scholarly work unconstrained by the methodological strictures limiting researchers today.

Meditating on Scott’s work indeed suggests a need to rethink his method or, as his critics have said, his lack thereof. Critics have given him the backhanded compliment of calling him an artist. David Laitin offered that assessment when reviewing Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*. That book showed Scott’s creative genius at work, but in calling him an artist Laitin made it clear he was suggesting that Scott’s work is unscientific. *Seeing Like a State* compares cases where governments have adopted what Scott characterizes as top-down, high modernist approaches to knowledge so as to impose development schemes on indigenous people in ways that are dismissive of local knowledge (or *mētis*, as Scott labels it). Specifically, Laitin criticized the comparative case analysis in that book; it did not, he said, reflect a systematic choice of cases that would enable a contrast between top-down and bottom-up approaches to development. As a result it was impossible, he claimed, to determine whether the two approaches to knowledge produced different outcomes. The type of systematic case analysis to which Laitin referred would be consistent with the approach proposed by Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba in *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. What supporters of this approach miss is that comparative case analysis can determine causality no more than can Scott’s focusing solely on cases where knowledge is imposed from the top down. Comparative analysis is just as insufficient to establish the conditions of controlled observation necessary for making causal claims.

What is lost in criticism of this kind is that Scott is not himself pursuing a causal analysis (in this or any of his books). *Seeing Like a State* is not a positivistic causal analysis designed to prove that top-down approaches to development are more likely than bottom-up approaches to result in failure. Instead, from an alternative, epistemologically self-conscious and interpretive perspective, *Seeing Like a State* illuminates in rich detail the specific ways in which top-down approaches tend to override local knowledge and therefore have serious long-run negative consequences. In other words, Scott’s interpretive analysis brackets the causality question, choosing to focus instead on helping us develop a nearly experiential understanding of how top-down strategies fail to account for local knowledge. Scott’s interpretive approach is designed to help us understand *how* things operate, rather than to arbitrate among the possible factors involved in *why*. What an experience is like, what it means to the people concerned—these are important

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questions that a causal analysis cannot answer. Criticizing Scott’s interpretive analysis for failing to be a positivistic causal analysis ignores what his alternative kind of investigation can deliver.

Calling Scott an artist, as I have noted, is akin to saying he is not a scientist: he is a creative thinker, Laitin suggests, but not a rigorous one. Still, the art-versus-science binary, as Nietzsche showed long ago in The Gay Science and elsewhere, is profoundly overdrawn. There is obviously a creative dimension to natural science, and creativity is crucial to good social science as well. Ideas can and ought to be used critically but also creatively to identify, name, and respond to social formations, processes, and relationships in the service of bettering the human condition. Scott’s use of ideas in this creative yet critical way is his most distinctive contribution to social science. His art is indeed a model for social science, though some of us resist it while clinging to pretensions of scientific rigor and value-free objectivity.

What Scott offers us, but we seem reluctant to see it, is a way to move beyond the “methodism” that Sheldon Wolin years ago warned us would ruin not just political science but the social sciences in general. The Art of Not Being Governed has methodological significance not because of its technical sophistication, but because it powerfully reminds us that the idea behind a work of scholarship is more important than its method, especially if the scholarship is intended to be politically and socially pertinent. It is increasingly recognized, within and without the academy, that social scientists have become preoccupied with method at the expense of substance and that, as a result, social science has diminished its ability to conduct research in ways that people can use to better understand and do something about what is happening in their society and economy. Compounding this problem of substance is that the theorists among us have increasingly created their own enclaves, thereby isolating empirical research from exposure to the full range of thinking in social science.

Scott’s studies of the arts of resistance and of the conditions that give rise to them follow no method per se, thereby reminding us that an idea, a concept, thoroughly supported by empirical evidence, can take us very far toward the insights that sustain social inquiry. Whether it is the moral economy of peasants in Southeast Asia, the cultural practices that serve as weapons of resistance for


the weak there (and elsewhere), the local knowledge of various peoples around the world who are oppressed by projects of modernization, or the anarchism of the hill people of Zomia evading state incorporation, Scott offers insights where methodists offer quibbles about causality. His work reminds us that ideas are an important part of the research process, that the ability to name a social phenomenon is a critical form of social research, and that data collection is less than meaningful if it does not facilitate constructive responses to social problems. It is in this sense that Scott’s work furthers what Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, and I have termed “applied phronesis” or “real social science.” That Scott’s work is not acknowledged and honored as such, but instead is condescended to as “artistic,” is a significant oversight—a category mistake. We ought indeed to attend as a profession to his exemplary, politically relevant work as a means of illuminating the darkness produced by our methodological obsessions.

Data: The Question of Evidence

Social scientists have data; lawyers have evidence. It is an interesting question why social scientists find evidence insufficient. But what is the difference between evidence and data? Perhaps data are theoretically informed evidence. (Data is a plural while evidence is singular, but that seems not to be the difference we need to appreciate—though I could be wrong.) Or perhaps data comprise, more precisely, a kind of evidence produced by methods that are informed by a theoretical perspective, whereas evidence is more or less brute fact. Yet Scott’s evidence is theoretically informed, while much of what passes today for data could be better grounded in ideas. So the distinction must lie elsewhere. Data comprise theoretically informed, empirical information that is transcontextual; that is, data are relevant beyond a specific context, whereas evidence is context-specific. Legal evidence is case-specific; social science data are in the service of generalizable claims. Scott’s work, most of the time though not always, has been more about providing evidence for a particular insight into a context-specific phenomenon (for instance, whether the hill people of Zomia consciously chose at various points in history to resist state incorporation) than about collecting data for a transcontextual and thus generalizable theory. It is up to us, then, to reflect on his analysis as it ramiﬁes beyond the case at hand.


11. Scott’s own assessment of his work is much more modest: “My dear friend at Wisconsin, Murray Edelman, who died not too long ago, had a very healthy attitude about scholarship. He said, ‘It’s all a compost heap. You just put down a layer of humus that helps other stuff grow. Your work will all be forgotten, but it will help stuff grow.’ When you see people using your ideas, it is all part of the compost heap.” James Scott, interview, in Gerardo Luis Munck and Richard Owen Snyder, Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 367.
Among Scott’s contributions is to help us appreciate the importance of evidence over data in making specific cases credible (as opposed to proving some theory to be generally true). This important distinction is another way of suggesting how wrong it is to try placing Scott in a safe, neat category or to criticize his work as unscientific. As a transdisciplinary investigator of political domination and the resistance to it, he is part historian and part anthropologist, though focused on politics, and is thus a nightmare for political scientists like Laitin who want their discipline to demonstrate that it has a unitary methodological paradigm, enabling it to use data to objectively assess theoretically informed empirical claims about what causes what to happen in politics. Instead Scott’s work shows us that there is a place in the discipline for evidence as well as data and that methodological pluralism, rather than some unitary paradigm, makes political science more effective.

**Structure versus Agency: Romancing Resistors**

*The Art of Not Being Governed* is the story of the hill people of Zomia, which is the upland territory stretching across Southeast Asia—primarily Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—and comprised variously over time by subpopulations (of diverse and changeable ethnic identity) that retreated into the hills, moving their settlements, changing their cropping practices, revising their cultural folkways, refusing to establish institutionalized patterns of hierarchical authority, so that there would be no leadership that could be co-opted by state emissaries. The state was never, for the various peoples who populated Zomia, a source of protection or the provider of a social safety net. Southeast Asia is not Sweden. Incorporation into the state system meant confiscatory taxation, land appropriation, and forced conscription into the military, as well as enslavement, starvation, and subjection to genocidal policies enacted to suppress opposition. “Fascism” does not quite cover it.

The peoples of Zomia, though rural and apparently primitive, were never backward or ignorant of the advantages of civilization. They proved again and again, Scott shows, to be wise beyond appearances. Their way of life was often the product of conscious choices, sometimes emulated individually, sometimes enacted collectively, but usually the product of real agency exercised to resist subordination. In the end, however, the centuries of resistance have finally proven ineffectual, with Zomia disappearing as state powers have been enhanced. The lessons that Scott draws are mostly for the peoples of Southeast Asia. His is not

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necessarily a story told against all states; nevertheless, it is not a story that friends of the state can take lightly. Like Scott’s earlier works, The Art of Not Being Governed should give proponents of greater state power a reason to reflect: watch out for what you wish for, you might get it. Context is almost everything, but we can learn from an examination of context-specific evidence lessons that may resonate for other people in other contexts. Scott’s method is more prismatic than any based on a sharp distinction between evidence and data, and it is his faceted approach to social science that results in scholarship that matters.

Controversies about Scott’s depiction of the peoples of Zomia have abounded since the book’s publication. Probably most of it has centered on whether there is enough evidence to support Scott’s admittedly tentative claim that people in that region actively abandoned literacy to resist state incorporation.14 More relevant to the professional debate over methodology is the criticism that Scott overinterprets when suggesting that many of the coping practices he highlights (such as avoiding the written word, or not developing hierarchical forms of leadership) were explicit and consciously crafted strategies for resisting state incorporation. Actually, this criticism harks back to a longstanding criticism of Scott’s work for romanticizing oppressed people’s ordinary folkways as intended forms of political opposition. The implication is that Scott attributes too much agency and forethought when he suggests that decision making of some kind is at the root of these sociocultural practices, when actually these folkways evolved in less explicit terms over the course of a longue durée.

This type of criticism goes to the core issue of how to study political behavior. Much of conventional, mainstream, contemporary political science assumes that individuals can choose how to act and that researchers should focus on individual choices; the quintessential case is the American voter, but study of rebellious behavior should be equally subject to this characterization.15 However, this orientation is at odds with a more critical, often leftist perspective that highlights the importance of social structures in constraining people’s choices. The distinction between these two basic approaches has been overdrawn. Karl Marx himself did not wholly favor structure over agency. As he famously wrote in his polemic “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing

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14. Scott’s admission that this claim is at best tentative is made, in a strikingly distinctive way, when he numbers as 6½ his chapter on “Orality, Writing, and Texts.”

themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.16

For Marx, then, there is a dialectical tension between structure and agency that drives history forward; this insight was central to his philosophy of historical materialism and to its explanation of how social change, including revolutionary change, occurs. Agents of change, according to Marx, carry the burden of history and act in response to its structural constraints but, within them, could act to remake structural conditions that in turn would shape how future agents could subsequently produce further changes. People are not completely free to act, individually or collectively, but they are free to act in response to structured conditions in any one place and time.

From Marx’s insight one might infer that criticizing Scott for romanticizing the people of Zomia misses the point. Scott provides extensive empirical documentation for many of the practices he claims were developed in Zomia as means of evading state subordination. Whether these practices were the result of conscious decisions to resist seems actually secondary. That these practices evolved, given the structured circumstances in which people found themselves, implies that they were at best constrained choices of varying degrees of conscious political calculation. What is important, however, is that these practices made state incorporation less likely; that people did not challenge, but rather participated in, them; and that, as Scott effectively documents, the people helped to sustain them. For instance, Scott repeatedly demonstrates that “swidden” (slash-and-burn) cropping practices made state appropriation of the harvest more difficult and undermined the imposition of padi farming, which is associated with a taxable property-rights regime that relies on sedentary agriculture. Swidden cropping grew up in Zomia and was well established, indeed lasted for centuries in some places. Whether people consciously chose to continue such practices as ways of resisting state incorporation seems very much less important than the plain fact that they did continue them, with the result that state incorporation was made less likely. That these people did not shift to a more sedentary agricultural system of padi rice-production underscores that, at a minimum, they were not working to change their system so as to achieve state incorporation. Where the structure of these developments in farming ends and the agency of political resistance begins seems very much beside the point.

16. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” appeared in a nonrecurring publication titled Die Revolution in 1852 and was republished with the title The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (as Marx had originally intended) in 1869. This quotation is taken from the Progress Publishers edition (Moscow, 1937), translated by Saul K. Padover from the 1869 German edition.
This issue of structure versus agency undergirds Scott’s suggestion that the people of Zomia were practitioners of anarchism as a conscious ideological orientation and way of life. For Scott, the Southeast Asian massif of Zomia was a “shatter zone” of refuge for those who resisted state incorporation, but it was also a region of various minorities with different cultures and languages who already, over time, had come to occupy the region, if not quite permanently to settle there. Scott emphasizes that, while their languages varied from each other, they shared traits distinct from those of incorporated peoples. Likewise with their cultural practices: the lives of these peoples evolved in ways suggestive of a deeper coherence. They lived beyond the rule of the state, but they lived according to rules—rules that gave their lives structure without a state to enforce it. Hence Scott’s description of the order that structured their lives as “anarchism.”

For most of us today, in the age of globalization, anarchism is at best a utopian philosophy about some impossible world where people, left to their own devices, naturally cooperate without need of a state.\textsuperscript{17} Scott’s book suggests that the anarchist way of life of Zomia has passed away since World War II, though he has noted, subsequent to the book’s publication, that he perhaps was premature with that assessment.\textsuperscript{18} But what Scott’s analysis in \textit{The Art of Not Being Governed} helps us to see is that anarchism is not simply an alternative to the state but also a practice that occurs within states, even now.

It is possible to imagine that even in the United States today anarchism is being practiced as a social movement. Throughout the course of US history, Americans have retreated to alternative communities, whether in the Burned Over District in New York State during the first half of the nineteenth century or the back-to-the-land movement of dropouts and hippies in the 1960s. More ominously, in the late twentieth century, survivalists and skinhead movements formed communities in resistance to the state, which in some cases they saw as a threat to the white Christian heritage of the country. (The Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, emerged from one of these groups.) Most recently, the Occupy Wall Street movement has generated worldwide protests, demonstrations, marches, and campaigns to undo the damage that bankers and financiers have inflicted on the global economy. Michael Kazin has written of the Occupy movement: “The ‘horizontal’ nature of a movement brought to life and sustained by social media fits snugly inside their anarchist vision of a future in which autonomous, self-governing communities would link up with one another, quite voluntarily of course.”\textsuperscript{19} Kazin recognizes that the anarchist style of organization is unlikely to produce a leadership that can be co-opted, but on the other hand

\textsuperscript{17} Peter Marshall, \textit{Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism} (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010).
he sees anarchists, past and present, as incapable of making the transition from effective protests to sensible policy proposals.

Along with many others who make criticisms of this sort, Kazin could benefit from reading Scott’s book. Kazin could learn that the primary goal of most anarchist movements is not to spell out a policy agenda but rather to promote a sensibility. The Occupy Wall Street slogan, “We are the 99 percent,” underscores how the top 1 percent (or actually fewer) have benefited at the expense of everyone else, often on the basis of state policy, which has allowed them to make money betting against our collective wellbeing. It has proven to be a powerful slogan and has brought people of diverse kinds—young and old, educated and homeless—together, bonded only by their shared disdain for the state’s failure to have protected them and their individual and collective futures. Their participation in protest politics is to varying degrees a product of the structural conjuncture of a massive economic meltdown, on the one hand, and severe political paralysis in the nation’s capital, on the other hand. In this sense, the Occupiers’ agency is in no small part structurally conditioned, producing participation in radical politics only by default. Many Occupy movement participants, not active before in this type of politics, have been radicalized only because the failure of the conventional avenues have left them no other option. Their radicalization bespeaks a process of subjectification, in which they have been enlisted or solicited as subjects by virtue of their place in the economic derailment and political dysfunction of the present. The Occupiers’ claim to be “the 99 percent” suggests that they are ordinary people and represent all of us who increasingly feel as though on the outside looking in and who are left with no options but to try reclaiming our place in society. The Occupiers suggest that each of us begin by occupying those spaces where power and privilege have produced our own exclusion.

The power of “the 99 percent” slogan lies in no small part in its suggestion that, while we are the many who have suffered at the hands of the few, we are also a collective made up of individuals who can come together to solve our own problems when the state fails us. This centrality of the individual's relationship to the collective and vice versa has at times been made explicit in the mobilization process. Consider the web page “We are the 99 Percent” with its “Tumblr” offering images of people who have suffered materially at the hands of the 1 percent, each image accompanied by a note: “I am the 99 percent.” The I/we inversion and the word/image imbrication serve to humanize an impersonal statistic. The binaries of I/we, word/image, and narrative/number are reversible, so that we can slide back and forth as required, in the spirit of the shape-shifting people of Zomia. The Occupy movement is open for individuals to partake (divide and share) as needed for individual and collective effect. This loosely organized sort

of anarchism builds a movement by allowing participants to offer their unique stories in a common cause—a creative response suggesting that, even in our depersonalized and bureaucratized society, people are finding ways in the face of crisis to create new solidarities, new ways for living together, and new codes for individual and collective action, not unlike the anarchists of Zomia.

But the anarchism of the Occupy movement goes further. It has no policy agenda in part because it is a mass mobilization of diverse people, held loosely together by their shared marginalization. Another reason, however, is that the Occupy movement’s anarchist leanings press its participants to move beyond the state for a resolution of the crisis. Campaigns to pressure banks for mortgage refinancing and student-loan forgiveness call for action independent of state policy. The anarchism of the movement’s organizational practices bleeds into the diversity of solutions that emerge from it. The strategic behavior of anarchists allows them to choose when and how to be identified, as well as when to partake of state benefits or protections and when to take action beyond the state. An anarchism along the lines of the sort in Zomia that Scott describes is alive and well today in America. Analysis born of Scott’s insights would serve us well as a reminder that ordinary people, if not denied the chance, have the capacity develop solutions to their problems. Scott’s analysis of Zomia is therefore not just good scholarship, it is scholarship that comes with a politics, and it offers potent political lessons even for the citizens of highly organized political systems today. The strange can be made familiar and useful, the familiar can be shown in a new and hopeful light. Utopian hope is always present, and people here and there are ever involved in social processes that give them hope. Scott’s kind of transdisciplinary research gives us hope that social science can help fashion opportunities and open up spaces of political possibility. Those are spaces that we should occupy artfully and with tenacious resolve.