

## Power and Agency: The Discipline-Shifting Work of James C. Scott

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THE PURPORTEDLY IRRECONCILABLE AIMS of “area studies” versus formal disciplines are a long-standing concern. In reality, their objectives are often inseparable, and approaches that start from and center a region have strongly contributed to theory building within disciplines. Few social scientists have been so productive in building bridges between these competing frames as James C. Scott, as evidenced by his celebrated body of work, his election to the presidency of the Association for Asian Studies, and his receipt of meritorious citations such as the Social Science Research Council’s 2020 Albert O. Hirschman Prize, awarded to “scholars who have made outstanding contributions to international, interdisciplinary social science research, theory, and public communication.”

Trained formally as a political scientist, for most of his career, Scott has moved seamlessly among that field, anthropology, history, sociology, environmental studies, and others. Throughout, several key concerns have anchored Scott’s work: examining Southeast Asia as a site of research (albeit increasingly in conversation with other regions), probing how power functions in the world, and exploring the agency of individuals—including and especially those on the socioeconomic margins—to resist, evade, or co-opt that power. The concepts and approaches that Scott has crafted or refined illustrate and advocate an organically interdisciplinary approach to questioning how the world works and why, rooted in empirical and historical studies of Asia.

Not only have Scott’s books and articles offered tremendous insight in their own right, but they have inspired generations of scholars—his own students and ranks of others—to pose different questions, seek different perspectives, and see the project of building knowledge and theory as exciting, challenging, and never straightforward or narrowly bound. This forum brings together a set of Scott’s former students whose empirical work is rooted in Asia to examine how his insights and works have shaped and reoriented our disciplinary fields. We reserve the last word for Scott himself.

Shaila Seshia Galvin starts off by revisiting Scott’s agenda-setting book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. She suggests that it represents an important breakthrough not just for Asian studies, but also for development studies broadly, moving the goalposts for the field away from rational choice scholars and development economists and toward the study of social justice. From development studies, Takeshi Ito delves into political economy, homing in on Scott’s novel and important integration of complex, contingent “social and ecological contexts” into the field—in which Scott’s unconventional grounding

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in agrarian political economy melds the imperative of subsistence with the nonhuman worlds of flora and fauna.

Again shifting the frame, and writing through the lens of political ecology, Pamela McElwee claims Scott as a (somewhat) unrecognized titan of that field in his attention to how both material resources and cultural lifeways influence resource control and resistance; how power flows through humans, nonhumans, and their organizational assemblages; and how the march of progress often claims to follow, but rarely takes, a straight line. Taking a different perspective on Scott's work at the intersection of humans and their environment, Ronald J. Herring examines how Scott's work illuminates developments within the praxis of genomics—for instance, in the identification and regulation of purportedly legible genetically modified organisms—by examining efforts to codify and manage, and to subvert, genetic engineering of crop seeds in China and India.

Eric Tagliacozzo, considering Scott's contributions to history as a discipline, focuses on the importance of *Zomia*, a reorienting approach that rested upon, and inspired, attention to space, people, commodities, and cultural, as well as political norms, as intrinsic to how this system functions. Scott's starting point in Southeast Asia has remained significant, but his querying of the potential for peripheries to resist and evade states, and of the disjuncture between state design and local praxis, has expanded well beyond a regional frame.

Finally, before turning the floor over to Scott, Meredith Weiss returns us to his home discipline, political science. Scott has brought to the discipline a creative and deeply grounded inquiry into questions of agency, she explains, within rather than simply across members of socioeconomic strata, as well as within—and to resist—states as bunglingly self-interested actors. That agency unsettles the discipline's customary fixation on institutions, as well as its greater focus on coercive power than on empowerment.