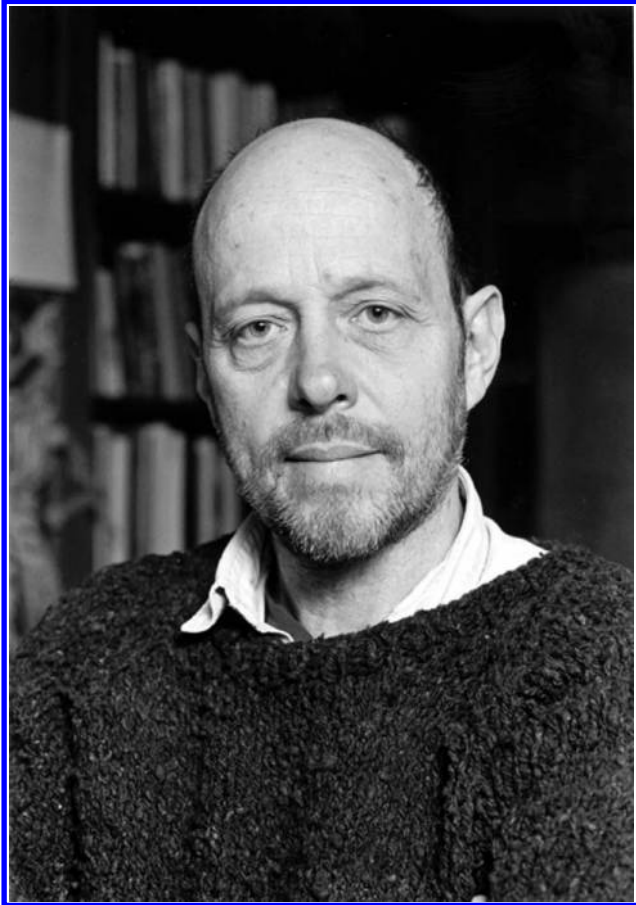


# An Interview with James C. Scott



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ON DECEMBER 11, 2014, James C. Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science and Professor of Anthropology and founding director of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University, gave a Distinguished Lecture in the Food Studies Centre at SOAS, University of London (co-organized by the Agrarian Change and Development Research Cluster at SOAS). Lectures in this series are co-sponsored by *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*. On the following day, Scott answered questions put to him by Harry G. West, Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Food Studies Centre; Celia

Plender, doctoral student in anthropology; and other SOAS students.

For decades, Scott has been a key figure in Southeast Asian Studies and in the comparative study of agrarian societies and peasant politics. His best-known works examine the state, hegemony, revolution, resistance, and anarchism, and include *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (Yale University Press, 1976), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1980), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998), and *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2008).

In this session, Scott reflects on his intellectual precursors and his place in the landscape of academic disciplines; the significance of food and agriculture in his work; the tenuous future of peasant agriculture and agrarian societies; globalization and the rise of corporate agriculture and the food industries; poverty and the struggle for justice; and his own experiences with farming and farm land conservation.

## PANEL:

JAMES C. SCOTT [JS]

HARRY G. WEST [HW]

CELIA PLENDER [CP]

HW: Jim, what drew you to “agrarian studies”—specifically with a focus on the peasantry and its relationship with the state—and what drew you to Southeast Asia? Is there a backstory that you can share with us that gives us a sense of this emergent intellectual agenda?

JS: I stumbled into Southeast Asia. I had bungled my honors thesis as an undergraduate, my professor dismissed me, and if I wanted an honors degree, I had to find someone who would adopt me. I was an economics major and someone said, well, I think I’d like to understand more about the economic development of Burma and if you do this I will adopt you as an honors student. And I said fine, and then when I closed the

door behind his office I said to myself, where's Burma? I got a Rotary Fellowship to go to Burma and one thing led to another and I became a Southeast Asianist. As far as agrarian studies is concerned, that's actually a simpler story and maybe typical of my generation. I started to teach as a Southeast Asianist during the middle of the Vietnam War and the expansion of the Vietnam War at the University of Wisconsin. The university had a long progressive tradition, which was one reason why I took a job there. The fall of 1967 when I arrived to begin teaching there were the so-called "Dow Riots" protesting the war and the manufacture and use of napalm ordnance by Dow as well as the contract research for the Department of Defense conducted on campus. These riots convulsed the campus and coincided with a strike by teaching assistants to secure unionization rights. The police responded badly and a good many students were beaten and arrested. The turmoil led to a series of all-faculty meetings in which I took an active part, speaking against the war and for the rights of the protestors. As a budding Southeast Asianist I spent a good deal of the following two years speaking against the war in Wisconsin and elsewhere. I became interested in peasant rebellion—understanding the Viet Cong and how peasant rebellions happened. I taught a course on peasant rebellion with a China specialist friend, Edward Friedman, and in those days we had 400, 500 students in the class who were fighting for the microphone to denounce us as insufficiently progressive. Finally I decided that since peasants were the largest segment of the world's population, it would be an honorable and worthy career to devote my life to the study of peasants and agriculture. So when I finally went to Yale, we began something called the Program in Agrarian Studies and it brought together all those people who were interested in rural life generally: land tenure, agriculture, now food and environment. For me it was a wonderful interdisciplinary community in which I learned a tremendous amount. I think of the book *Seeing Like a State* as the book that agrarian studies helped me write, just by attending all of the seminars that we had—including ones which Harry presented.

HW: The next question really builds on that. It's about disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, because you regularly engage in your work with a range of disciplines: political science, anthropology, history, in the Program on Agrarian Studies forestry is very prominent, people in environmental sciences as well; your work is also used by people in these disciplines. And you use ethnographic methods, you use archival methods, you engage with culture in ways that the typical political scientist doesn't. So tell us your thoughts on disciplines; their usefulness, the problems they pose, where

your work fits in relation to them. Do you consider yourself to be undisciplined?

JS: Definitely! I was trained as a political scientist and the profession bores me, to be frank. I am truly bored by mainstream work in my discipline, which strikes me as a kind of medieval scholasticism of a special kind. People ask me about the intellectual organization of my interdisciplinary work, and I have to say, it's the consequence of boredom and the knowledge that so many other things had been written about peasants that are more interesting than anything political scientists have written about them, that I should go to those places and learn these things and read things outside of the discipline like Balzac and Zola, novels about the peasantry and memoirs. If you spend all of your time reading mainstream political science, you are going to reproduce mainstream political science. Nothing else can happen from that particular place. It seems to me, anything interesting that happens in political science is probably an import from some exotic place outside political science and I happen to go to different exotic places than other people and once in a while I stumble across something that helps me understand. The thing that attracted me to anthropology is that it insisted on a kind of eyes-wide-open fieldwork and total immersion in a peasant community and so I went from political science to a kind of anthropology envy. I can remember the first time I gave a talk when, I think it was in Toronto, and they didn't know what discipline I came from, and they said, "Jim Scott, social anthropologist from Yale" and I thought, oh my God, I've finally passed. I felt so proud that they didn't know I was a political scientist; I had succeeded in transcending my background.

HW: Next we have a question which deals with a methodological aspect of the kind of ethnographic work that you've done.

CORMAC CLEARY: In *Weapons of the Weak* you say that "power-laden situations are nearly always inauthentic." Being a member of an elite Western institution yourself and so occupying a high position in global power structures, I was wondering whether this has affected your search for the "hidden transcript" among peasants and, if so, how you have gotten around this?

JS: The only fieldwork of any real extent that I've done was for *Weapons of the Weak* and this was a sort of mainstream, rice farming village in the state of Kedah in Malaysia. I spent nearly two years in a small village—perhaps seventy families. I've never worked harder or learned so much so fast in my life; as an anthropologist you are at work from when you open

your eyes in the morning to when you close them at night. I always read a novel for twenty minutes, with a flashlight under the mosquito net no matter how late I had finished my fieldnotes—long after everyone else in the house was asleep—just to clear my head and travel, briefly, to another world. My whole family was with me and between the four of them, they noticed many things that I had overlooked. I think it is fair to say that this was the one occasion on which I tried to earn my “stripes” as a field ethnographer. Though I stumbled any number of times I felt that I did manage to come to know one village intimately enough so that whenever I was tempted to make some third-order generalization about peasants and villagers I had one place I knew sufficiently so that I could at least avoid the usual clichés. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, which has no original field research of mine at all, deals further with the subject of “hidden transcripts”—I think it is my work that’s traveled furthest outside the social sciences in some way. And you can’t think about these issues without examining your own performance before people of power and the performance of people over whom you have power when you interact with them. It’s made me exquisitely self-conscious. I’m in charge in part of trying to raise money for this Agrarian Studies Program, so once every year I have to go to New York and I have to do a convincing performance for foundation executives that what we’re doing is exactly what they want to have happen in the world. It’s nothing like people who are the bottom of the heap who are indigent and so on, so I don’t want to dignify my insights with any particular kind of power, but it’s not as if all of us don’t find ourselves having to present ourselves in the most favorable light before someone who has the power to help us or hurt us or to injure us, and so on. In the same fashion you sit around a seminar table at a university and the circular formation of the table makes it seem as if everybody is equal. In a sense the architecture of the seminar says equality and it says Habermas’s ideal speech situation. But in fact some people give grades and other people take them and I’m under no illusions—the performance in a seminar is both a performance for one’s fellow students and a performance for the professor who gives out the grades.

CP: Going back to your intellectual project, could you name three to five scholars whose work has been particularly important to your own development and explain how their work has informed yours?

JS: There are books that I’ve read that are absolutely central to my intellectual formation, such as Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*. Someone told me that I had to read it before I went to graduate school, and this is someone I respected,

and so I did, and if it’s not the most influential book I read in my intellectual development, it’s pretty close to it and it still kind of rings true. I found that eight or ten years ago I taught it and I thought students would not be interested in the Speenhamland system of poor relief, but it turns out to be an incredibly charismatic book and everyone loved reading it. So Karl Polanyi is at the center of that. E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* is also enormously important to me. I can remember the chair I was sitting in when I read it, because it took me two or three days. That certainly has stuck with me in terms of the analysis of class consciousness. And I have the pictures of two scholars up over my desk. One of them is Marc Bloch, who worked on feudal society in France and the essential characteristics of French rural history. He was the kind of rural historian that I would like to have become if I were an historian, the person who can stand on a hill and read the history of the landscape over the last three or four centuries just by looking at the hedgerows, at the marks on the land. I think *Feudal Society*, all two volumes of it, but without footnotes, is one of the most readable, wonderful books I’ve ever read. And the other one is Chayanov. *The Theory of Peasant Society*, which basically comes from meticulous studies of labor and expenditure and cropping in small peasant farms, which were part of an Austrian and German tradition of small farm studies around the turn of the century. It’s worth noting that Chayanov was murdered by Stalin in the early 1930s and Marc Bloch was murdered by the Nazis in the course of the Second World War as well. Finally, in *Seeing Like a State* it struck me all of a sudden that the people who make great innovations are often people who are knowledgeable about a discipline, but who have not been trained in the mainstream of that discipline. I learned so much from Jane Jacobs’ work on *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. She was not an urban planner, she was not an urban historian, she worked as a journalist for an architectural magazine, and she had a different eye, as a mother among other things, and as a walker in the city. She saw the city with eyes that no urban planner would, and she produced the best critique of modernist urban planning that I think we have that’s now kind of settled doctrine, but at the time, in 1960, it wasn’t. The other example is Rachel Carson. She starts out her book *Silent Spring* with women in Michigan noticing that there are no songbirds in their backyard any more, and wondering what’s happened to them. She was a marine biologist who happened to be interested in pesticides and wildlife, and both of these people wrote books which are orthogonal to the discipline and the work on biology and environment at the time and they both launched hundreds and hundreds of ships of other scholars who wanted

to do work of that kind. So it's kind of sobering that most of this work is produced by, I wouldn't say outsiders, but quasi-outsiders. So, the trick is, how can you make yourself a quasi-outsider and see with fresh eyes all the things that your discipline takes for granted and one of the things you can do of course is to reverse every assumption that your discipline teaches you and see how it looks upside-down, and usually it's just as plausible as it is the way that you're taught and that's a good way to start.

CP: Following on from the last question, if your primary interest has been in the dynamics of agrarian society, how would you characterize the significance of agriculture and food in your own intellectual project?

JS: Well, for more than two decades I was a sheep breeder. I do a little gardening but I'm not much interested in scratching the earth and making vegetables grow. I'm an animal husband person and I always have loved raising animals. It was never very profitable; I did learn to do my own shearing—which is definitely the hardest thing I've ever learned to do—and sheared for neighbors. So I have enjoyed a kind of relationship with agriculture as a mediocre farmer, as a mediocre sheep raiser, and as a mediocre beekeeper—and I'm serious about the mediocrity, I'm right there in the middle. As a sheep shearer I get a sort of solid B or B plus, alright? In any case, I found that actually practicing a little agriculture makes me sensitive to issues that I would not otherwise understand. There were four of us who started the agrarian studies program; we thought this was essentially a peasant studies program. We were interested in land tenure and we were interested in peasants. We didn't know anything about crop biology and botany and how things grew and soil composition and environment or food and supply chains. So what has happened is that the students who've come to our door over the past twenty, twenty-five years have been interested more in environment, in food, in supply chains. The people in environmental studies know a lot about soil cover and nutrients and erosion. So I think that my interest in food and agriculture, qua-agriculture as opposed to peasants, is a result of changes in the zeitgeist and the things that people are interested in. I remember, we were going to do a little conference on land tenure, and I remember Michael Pollan, who's got a good sense for the popular zeitgeist, saying, you know, if you do a conference on land tenure no one's going to come. Figure out a way to start with food and then you can take 'em anywhere you want to take 'em, but you ought to start with a place where you know they're likely to be engaged. Now I think the fact is that food is, given the current concerns about health and food chains and environment and so on, it's

a fabulous way to have people trace back where whatever they're eating comes from and how it was created and the supply chain that put it together, and that's part of a serious analysis of capitalism, and I mean you can go to deep theoretical levels, starting out with that piece of meat on your plate, or that vegetable.

HW: We want to shift into some questions that have a thematic focus now. In *Weapons of the Weak* there's the story of the combine harvester: after this technology begins to replace peasant labor, one gets stuck in the mud and peasants are then asked to help get it out. Of course they're not very pleased about that and resist it. So it's a story both of them becoming irrelevant and of their resisting this. I think of this story as suggesting two possibilities. It may be emblematic of a moment of transition that's irreversible, or it may be a story that is told over and over and over again in many different places and at many different times. As you look back over the years and what you've seen in the various places and the things that you've studied, the question is, how long can this timeless story be retold before there is no one left, of the sort that you have long studied, to resist?

JS: So, let me tell you why that story seemed important to me at the time and why we might think of stories like that as telling us something important. So this was in a sense the waves of history rolling over these small farmers in the area in which I was doing my research. They understood that their days were numbered and the combine harvester stuck in the mud was a kind of moment of reversal, it was a moment of symbolic victory and it was important for them because it was a moment of success and triumph in a world in which the cards were stacked against them in every other way, and that's why they dwelt on it. It's interesting that the world of rumors and gossip is a world of wish fulfillment. And one of the things that gives volume and amplitude to a rumor is that it satisfies people's dreams and expectations about the world—and it's not just peasantry. I remember, there was a man in my village who was actually disliked, because aside from me he was the only person who had a little automobile, and he never took anyone to the hospital, never did any service for the village. There was a rumor that the Chinese from whom he'd borrowed the money for the car had come to repossess it, and I've never seen people happier, because they hated him because he wasn't using his wealth to be a good member of the community and they were just overjoyed at the news. It permeated the whole village for days and days and days, but it turned out to be false. And lo and behold, two months later the Chinese middlemen did come and take the car, so that they had their moment. I think Eric Hobsbawm captures this in his idea of

social banditry. There's hardly any country that you can find that doesn't have the history of what Hobsbawm calls social banditry, that is, people who rob from the rich and give to the poor, who are seen as benefactors of the poor. Hobsbawm's point, which I think is absolutely correct, is that it doesn't much matter what the social bandit is doing, and, you know, stories about Jesse James helping little old ladies across the street, of coming home to his town to teach Sunday school as a good Christian, none of this is even remotely true. This is the dream that people had that he was one of them and was a good Christian citizen of his town. And so they fill the void in information with their utopian expectations of what a good man who was violating the law on their behalf might have done. So the world of rumor and gossip is like a privileged world with which a social scientist or an anthropologist can take the temperature of popular aspirations.

HW: How long does this story go on? Does it go on interminably or is there an endgame in all of this?

JS: In a world of injustice there's going to be dreams of justice; whether there are peasants around, whether it's justice for peasants or not, is another thing. We may be seeing the end of the smallholder in many places, Via Campesina notwithstanding, it may be that the days are numbered for small property of that kind. But it seems to me that rumors and dreams of justice are part of a dialectic of injustice and dreams of justice will be with us for as long as there's injustice, and that doesn't seem to be in short supply.

HW: Sticking with the theme of resistance, in *The Art of Not Being Governed* you make the argument that there are particular natural ecologies — in that case it's hills, it's mountains, it's high terrain — that lend themselves to forms of resistance, forms of retreat from authority, and you map that out very nicely with the kind of relationship between people, their cultivars, and these spaces of resistance. We see today all kinds of forces that are expanding into these hinterlands and borderlands, as well as the exhaustion of arable land and now the farming of marginal areas, including rainforest ecosystems, and terrain that has greater slope. We also see attempts in the agricultural sciences to create technologies that can be expanded into these terrains. But to what extent do you see these ecological niches themselves as being able to persist through time and provide a kind of cover or a kind of habitat for forms of social, economic, and political resistance?

JS: That's a big question. There are parts of most countries, particularly in the global south, in which the state never had much interest. They might be deserts, they might be swampy, they might be "empty quarters" as they're called, but they'd be

areas in which the population is relatively thin, it doesn't produce much in the way of important resources of trade, and so these are areas that I called "fiscally sterile" areas in *The Art of Not Being Governed*. In British and French colonial rule these areas were ruled indirectly by appointing some native chief over them and making sure they didn't cost the metropolitan country any money. The areas that were valuable economically as export zones, tax fields and so on, were ruled more or less directly. What's interesting to me is that in the late twentieth century it seems that there's scarcely a part of the world that doesn't have some capitalist return that can be realized providing that this area's made accessible and resources can be extracted from it. This includes rare earth metals, for different kinds of ores, used for cell phones and the aerospace industry; hydroelectric sites; and stands of timber, which can actually be gotten out by helicopter in the most difficult situations. I think swamps that have not been drained are one of the last areas that persist. So in the Civil War, when the Civil War began in the United States there were seven thousand escaped slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp, the Virginia–North Carolina border, because it was an area in which you could go and be safe if you couldn't make it to Canada. And so it's not as if these "non-state" spaces are absent, it's that they're fewer and fewer. Increasingly, there are technologies available to make such previously off-the-grid spaces legible and bring them under control. Think, for example, of the Vietnam War and Agent Orange, which was an effort to destroy the canopy of the forests so that you could actually detect movements of Viet Cong underneath the canopy. And the spread of plantations: palm oil, rubber, what have you, in Southeast Asia, is also making these places legible. As is the movement of valley peoples whose population is growing quickly in Southeast Asia. There's this effort in Vietnam, in Burma, in Thailand, to take Thai, Burmans, and Vietnamese and move them up into the hills in order to engulf the indigenous population and to people the borders with people who they regard as culturally similar and more loyal. And the same of course is true of what's happening in southwest China; it's the movement of large numbers of Han populations into these areas that essentially overwhelms and engulfs an indigenous population that becomes a minority. And if you look at the borders of Tibet, most of the Tibetan Buddhists are outside of the autonomous region of Tibet, and that's by design in order to divide them up and mix them with Han populations who can dominate them.

HW: So there's one more question here that pertains to the dynamic between disappearance and persistence. It relates to food and foodways in Southeast Asia.



ANDY SPRAKLEN: In reference again to *Weapons of the Weak*, have you recently revisited Muda? What are your views on the state and the future sustainability of the Southeast Asian food system and the cuisines that it supports, and to what extent are Western methods of production and consumption habits impacting Southeast Asian cuisine, in your view?

JS: I do go back to this village every four or five years as a kind of matter of habit and of loyalty, but it's changed enormously and a lot of the people that I knew are now dead. I think it's important to say that in terms of foodways, the area in which I was working was an area of marine clay soils that was sea bottom not so very long ago, geologically, and that it was entirely a rice-growing plain. I mean people grew a handful of vegetables during the dry season along the canals, watering them from time to time, but this place didn't grow very much except rice, period. There were small fish in the paddies and in the canals and there were a whole series of greens that one could gather, which are called *kangkung*, which people sort of ate every day. So I actually think that I probably had the healthiest diet of my entire life, because it was fish, rice, and greens, every day, all day. And it was monotonous, but there was nothing unhealthy about it except there was not much in the way of fruits that came from the highlands, but they were available in most of the markets because Malaysia had a pretty good road system that made the movement of things, of hill products, possible. So my impression is that Malayan peasant cuisine is monotonous but quite healthy, and they do have bananas and coconuts. With a little extra cash they can add the fruits and vegetables that are not grown in their region. So I think, given the constraints of income, they eat probably as well as almost anybody in the world. In the city Malaysia is a kind of wonderful hybrid of Chinese food, Indian food, Malay food, and also fusions of these foods. Many of you are familiar with so-called Nyonya food, which is the sort of Straits Chinese version of Malay food, which is famous in Penang and other places. So I think as a cosmopolitan place with a lot of different tastes and a pretty intelligent food-consuming public, that Malaysia has a food culture that's very rich and varied. Now, if you change the lens on your question a little bit and ask what's happening to Malaysia as a food producer, then by and large it's producing palm oil, rubber, and rice, three basic commodities, and not contributing much to the biodiversity of agricultural goods. From that perspective of where they fit into the international food chain, you could draw a much more pessimistic and lamentable picture, Malaysia has probably gone about as far as any country in the world to replace small farms with industrial,

monocropped plantations, mostly for industrial crops like oil palm and rubber and monocropped timber with all the loss of biodiversity, crop diseases, and heavy use of pesticides and herbicides that implies.

CP: Now we'd like to move on to thinking more about corporations, globalization, and the role of the state, in the food system and agriculture.

TRACEY CAMPBELL: Given that few societies, if any, are now fully independent of the kind of market forces that you have been discussing today, how should ethnographers consider corporations as actors when they're doing their research? To elaborate a little further, a lot of people studying peasant agriculturists bemoan the presence of a market or corporations who extract value from the peasants, but there doesn't seem to be any robust methodology for dealing with the corporations on the other side of those transactions so that there's a corporate perspective on the transaction. It seems to be a sort of "here there be dragons" area of ethnographic research.

JS: I suppose that would be remedied by the kind of ethnography in which people who either undercover, or with permission, go and do ethnographies of corporations as they're dealing with them, right? So I would recommend a hero student of mine who's named Tim Pachirat. He had an idea which was not politically correct for a political scientist; he was interested in what it did to people to kill sentient beings every day all day for a living. And so what he did, although he's originally of Thai-American background and was going to work in Thailand, he learned Spanish and got himself a job in a slaughterhouse working for a year and a half, including working on the kill floor of the slaughterhouse, and ended up writing an ethnography of vision in the slaughterhouse in a book that I promise you, you cannot put down, it is so gripping. Everybody said that this was a career-ending move as a dissertation, but he wanted to do it and the book is an astounding account of the way in which the clean and dirty sections of a slaughterhouse are kept separate from one another and workers treated differently, and the way the line works. You could only write this ethnography, I think, by actually doing this work. And if he asked permission they never would have given it to him, so he just did it. So, he avoided all of the protocols for the people you're interviewing, etc., he just ignored it all and did it. To begin with nothing much happened; he spent three months hanging livers in a cold room with another Hispanic worker. I mean, three months just taking a liver that came on a chain and putting it in a box and passing it on. And so he didn't think that there was a lot of ethnography coming out of the room where he

was packing livers, but he gradually worked his way into other parts of the plant. But I wish more people would go into the belly of the beast, either of corporations or supermarkets or institutions. At the end of his book he suggests making slaughterhouses out of glass and allowing schoolchildren to see how their meat's prepared. I always believed that social science was a progressive profession because it was the powerful who had the most to hide about how the world actually worked and if you could show how the world actually worked it would always have a de-masking and a subversive effect on the powerful. I don't think that's quite true, but it seems to me it's not bad as a point of departure anyway.

HW: Moving on to the state now, you associate developing technologies of rule historically with ever more exploitative forms of hierarchy, and of course revolutionary states come in for focused critique in your work, as you distinguish between struggles over and through the apparatus of the state and you point out that these struggles have generally been disastrous for peasants and the working poor. But in a globalized world where decisive forms—and here I'm thinking about things like vertically integrated food supply chains—operate at ever greater distances and seem ever less controllable to ordinary people, is there not some role for the state; is resistance possible without engaging the state, without using the state in one way or another?

JS: It's hard to see any institutional structure that stands in the way of the homogenization and simplification of these supply chains in international capitalism, unless it is the nation state, right? Unless it is a kind of authoritative state structure. So, "yes." [laughs] Now, qualifications that will leave little of the "yes" standing. First of all, most states aren't even remotely democracies and most of the people who run these states by and large do the bidding of their corporate masters and take bribes and are servants of international capitalism, right? So we can't rely on those states, can we? And then you take contemporary Western democracies, let me use my own country which I know best as an example, yes, you have an electoral system, yes you reelected the first black man president, yes there are some changes. On the other hand, the concentration of wealth has grown steeper and steeper and steeper, it allows lobbyists and people who provide campaign finance to basically control a campaign and its message, these people tend at the sort of high echelons of the corporate world to control most of the media and its messaging—right? These people are also able to sit on the congressional committees and write the loopholes in the legislation. Even when there is reform, they're able to so influence the wording of the legislation that the loopholes are built in, they don't have to be

found, they're actually legislated. And so then you get a state that in a neoliberal world is less and less able to be an honest mediator, a representative of popular aspirations, to discipline corporations. I want to leave a little bit of the yes standing, because as the result of the financial crisis there were slightly more stringent rules on bank capitalization, on regulation, on some consumer protection, but I think by and large there is not much in that way. Now, Scandinavian social democracy is a better picture, but North Atlantic, Anglo-American neoliberalism is not providing the kind of state that I think can provide this kind of discipline and regulation. I'm pessimistic.

ORLENA YEE: Your work, and your answers today, have documented many of the ways that states undermine peasant farming, land tenure rights, and even agricultural ecologies, but in some historical instances the state *has* played a key role in securing endangered ecosystems, shoring up land rights, and subsidizing farming. Can you comment on the scope for the state to play a beneficial role in such instances?

JS: Tell me more about these places that are protecting farmers and ecosystems.

ORLENA YEE: In *Weapons of the Weak* you use the example of the double-cropping of rice, how the state took control of the water supply and how Muda became a double-cropping area. And initially that did raise the level of everyone's well-being, but as you argued, over time the inequalities increased, particularly for the peasants, who suffered. But in the initial instance it did help. And I was just wondering if there were any other instances like that?

JS: So that's true, everyone looked on the double-cropping as the first time when even poor families could eat rice all year long, which was an important sort of civilizational marker for them. So that was a moment in which land tenure remained constant and the supply of water all year round increased and it was a boom for everyone. But very quickly those effects began to filter back and change the land tenure system, in which large owners who had previously had to rent to tenants because they couldn't farm large areas, could use the big machines and then could farm, and kick off a lot of their tenants. So my impression is that it's only in quasi-revolutionary situations where the state steps in and guarantees smallholder property that this occurs. The most striking example of that is probably the Mexican Revolution in which Mexican peasants got back their *milpa* lands, which had been taken away by plantations. And up until the new basic law ten years ago, enforced in part by the World Bank, a lot of Mexican peasants had at least a foot in the land—they were able to grow some of the major subsistence crops that they needed.

But I think that's actually fairly rare and when it does happen, it happens because there's a popular movement of land rights that is powerful enough to create a government that is dedicated to that and to enforcing it. As you know, the world is filled with failed land reforms, so usually there's what's called a land retention limit. I remember someone explaining this to me in the Philippines, they were traveling with a land reform team and the news came over the radio, they were setting the limit of how much land you could keep before it would be seized and distributed to tenants, and it turned out that—I think I have this right, this was under Marcos a long time back in the mid-1970s—that the retention limit was declared to be twenty hectares, which is a lot of rice land. And the land reform team broke into spontaneous applause, because they all owned between ten and twenty hectares of land themselves and they were happy that none of this land was going to be taken away from them. So when you have a retention limit of course, it's possible for people to avoid it in hundreds of ways by distributing land to their cousins, their children, their nephews, their nieces, and to make sure that no one rises above this retention limit. So most government land reforms are effectively a dead letter and those that are not are because of a mass of popular pressure or an actual revolution. The other thing I wanted to mention is, especially in the neoliberal moment that we're living in, the economists of the IMF and the World Bank believe that the only way of economic progress is for land to seek its highest return, and that is to create a market, a national market in land in which anybody can buy land anywhere, and that means making sure that people who have unclear titles are given clear titles—this is Hernando de Soto's particular hobbyhorse. What they're trying to do in Mexico is to title all these tiny little pieces of land and Hernando de Soto believes they can use it as a collateral to get a loan to start a small business of one kind or another. In fact, it allows for the concentration of land in the hands of wealthy entrepreneurs who may actually be able to get more profit out of this land than a smallholder, but probably at the price of the insecurity of smallholders who previously had some subsistence goods that they were in direct control of.

So it seems to me that the largest development project in the world is the World Bank land titling project. It's a formula. Any officials, I suppose, can send, oh . . . , \$49.99 and a cereal box top to the World Bank, and they will send them back a land titling kit, because they are titling land all over the world with the objective of making it possible to market land in a secure, contractual way that's guaranteed by law—they're trying to make land a commodity. While I'm mentioning that, I think it's interesting that it's now possible for countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, China, and so on to actually lease for ninety-nine years huge tracts of land in the Third World. And so it turns out that land is not only a fungible commodity within a national market for property, but it's also an international market for land in which the one thing you thought would stay in the same place can effectively be sold to foreigners.

CLAIRE GILBERT: Thinking about land on a smaller scale, I was reading about your farm in New Haven and this really struck a chord with me, given your comments on “escape agriculture” in *The Art of Not Being Governed* and also on the sense of autonomy provided by land ownership in *Two Cheers for Anarchism*. So my question is, to what extent do you see your farm and other smaller hobby farms, if you will, as effective forms of resistance in the West?

JS: I don't think they're resistant at all. [laughter] You know, as you say, it's a hobby farm, and now, instead of sheep I have two Scottish Highland cows who've been there for seven or eight years and are like decorative lawn ornaments, more or less, and I have chickens and bees and I do this for my peace of mind. What I have done, I wouldn't dignify it with the name of resistance, is that I've come to love this land so well—it's about forty-six acres—that I arranged to have it put in a “conservation easement,” which means that it can never be built on and always has to be open land or agricultural land, and that sort of reduced its value to my children. Oh well, too bad for them. But it means that there will never be a Walmart or a Sainsbury's, and so I've done what little I can to make sure that I've done right by the land. 🍷