

Interview with James C. Scott

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James C. Scott, Stellan Vinthagen

Contents

<i>Introduction to the interview</i>	3
<i>The interview with James C. Scott</i>	7
<i>Key references (only books)</i>	18

Introduction to the interview



In my capacity as the editor of *Journal of Resistance Studies*, I travelled to an old New England homestead in Durham, Connecticut, USA, and conducted an interview with one of the founding fathers of resistance studies: James C. Scott. In a rural, traditional white wooden house, among some chickens and two cows, a vegetable garden, and with a library and writing desk in a barn, lives this Sterling Professor of Political Science, Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University.

In 1985, “everyday resistance” was introduced by James C. Scott as a theoretical concept, in order to cover a different kind of resistance; one that is not as dramatic or visible as rebellions, riots, demonstrations, revolutions, civil war and other such organized, collective or confrontational articulations of resistance. According to Scott, everyday resistance is quiet, dispersed, disguised or otherwise seemingly invisible to elites, the state or mainstream society; something he sometimes also calls “infrapolitics.” Over the years, Scott has shown through his research how certain common behaviour of subordinated groups, for example, foot-dragging, escape, sarcasm, passivity, laziness, repeated misunderstandings, disloyalty, slander, avoidance or theft, is not always what it seems to be, but that it instead can productively be understood as “resistance.” Scott argues these activities are tactics that exploited people use in order to survive by gaining small and material advantages and simultaneously, temporarily undermine repressive domination, especially in contexts when rebellion is too risky. As such, this is the preferred “weapons of the weak.”

According to Scott, the form of resistance depends on the form of power. Resistance always needs to adapt to the context, and the situation of the people that use it. Those who claim that “real resistance” ‘is organized, principled, and has revolutionary implications ... overlook entirely the vital role of power relations in constraining forms of resistance’ (Scott 1989, 51). They overlook the fact that they prefer a form of resistance that is suitable to their own context, while it might be ineffective and even a suicide for others, living in a very different context. If we only look for “real resistance”, then ‘all that is being measured may be the level of repression that structures the available options’ (Scott 1989, 51). Contrary to others before him, Scott suggests how the primary resistance activity in history, at least among the repressed classes, is instead happening through a form of micro politics of a small class war in the everyday. As such, contrary to the conventional perception, the main form of political engagement by the ordinary people (the repressed classes) in any given society in history, is through such infrapolitics.

During the last four decades Scott has published extensively on the topic, over time clarifying his arguments and novel perspective on the political activism of common people. He laid out the foundation in a book called *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976). Here Scott argues that the peasant society is only possible to understand if we recognize their key challenge: maintaining subsistence. Emanating from this focus on survival by avoiding risks—not maximizing gain—a ‘moral economy’ emerges, which guides the logic of peasant communities; the practical decisions on agricultural techniques, the relationships with each other, the state, as well as to formations of political interests and the (occasionally) revolutionary behaviour. Scott argues in a forceful way how this moral economy logic explains both the well-known conservatism and repeated rebellions of peasants. And then, ten years later, Scott gives a name to this (peasant) political logic: everyday resistance.

This naming of everyday resistance was possible through his groundbreaking work in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), a book that details his anthropological study of a small peasant village in Malaysia. In this village he developed enough trust over time among the subsistence peasants to realize that despite them never openly challenging their big landlords, the tax

collectors of the state or the forced introduction of modern agricultural technology, they in fact effectively undermined the tax system, and mitigated the domination of elites and the effects of modernization. In this study Scott was able to map in detail a whole range of tactics of hidden and disguised forms of resistance, virtually an underground world of everyday resistance. From then on, Scott showed in new books how not only peasants, but a vast range of different subordinated groups, have applied forms of everyday resistance, always in relation to their particular circumstances, but with the same logic.

In the immediate follow-up of *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South East Asia* (Kerkvliet and Scott 1986), the focus is on how peasants use everyday resistance in the regional context of South East Asia. Some years later, Scott takes a bold new step, and develops a coherent theoretical framework in the now classic work of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1992), which today is regarded as fundamental for the understanding of everyday resistance. Here the locally developed concepts in Scott's classic ethnographic study among peasants in Malaysia is made into a more general framework, shown to be applicable to serfs as well as slaves and other particular subaltern groups. Through this fourth book, Scott takes a step away from the narrower field of Peasant Studies, arguing the case of everyday resistance among subaltern groups in general.

True to his view that domination determines the space of manoeuvre for resistance, he then goes on to analyse the main source of domination: the state. In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), Scott develops a theory of the state in which it becomes clear that its universalizing attempt to dominate the society is failing in large part due to subordinated citizens that undermine its schemes through everyday resistance. As such, it can be seen as an anarchist approach to the fundamental failure of the state. Therefore, it becomes logical that Scott's next step is to take a closer look at anarchist communities, but not the ones we normally associate with anarchism: the urban, young radicals that are full of ideological commitment who reject the state. Instead, in 2010 Scott released a fascinating book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, where he argues that what anthropologists up until now have viewed as "Indigenous" people in the hill areas of Southeast Asia ("Zomia") are in reality a post-state mix of ethnic groups that in waves over several centuries fled up into the hill areas to avoid various state coercions and urban problems, like taxes, slavery, conscription, epidemics and wars. Over a long history this mix of groups merged into a fully-fledged culture of everyday resistance, where their way of organizing their religion, communities, agriculture and political institutions were all designed to avoid state control. Obviously, Scott upset a lot of traditionalist anthropologists, but his interpretation has withstood the critical attacks, and now represents an alternative and possible view of these hill people. Among the striking circumstances that others have not been able to explain, but that makes total sense in his novel interpretation, is the fact that the "Indigenous" are ethnically very mixed, and prefer mobile agricultural practices, and nurture myths of a time of pre-history when they were able to read and write, while they (for some reason) decided to unlearn that practice. However, this culture of everyday resistance seems to be endangered now in late modern times, when finally, states indeed are able to climb hills.

In later years, Scott claims to have left the theme of resistance, roaming into other areas of greater interest (for the historical emergence of states, see his latest book, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017)). However, before he felt really done with the study of resistance, he published *Decoding Subaltern Politics: Ideology, Disguise, and Resistance in Agrarian*

Politics (2013), a smaller book in which he is summarizing his main arguments in a condensed way.

Through his many years of work on everyday resistance, Scott fundamentally transformed our understanding of politics, literally making the ordinary life of subordinated groups part of political affairs. He also directly played an inspirational role in the international establishment of Subaltern Studies as a distinct school that reformulated a ‘history from below’ of India and South Asia (Kelly 1992, note 1, 297; Ludden 2002, 7–11; Sivaramakrishnan 2005), and he has inspired numerous empirical studies on everyday resistance, largely building on his framework (see an extensive overview in Johansson and Vinthagen 2020).

Since the *Journal of Resistance Studies* is one expression of this emerging field of resistance studies, inspired to a high degree by the work of James C Scott, and since over the years we have published several articles that discuss Scott’s concepts and theories, we felt it made sense to interview him, and take a closer look at some of his research and topics, asking him some of the questions that arise from it.

The interview with James C. Scott

Stellan Vinthagen: Could you say what is your most important intellectual inspirations for understanding resistance?

James C Scott: I grew up during the Vietnam War, I started teaching during the Vietnam War, and I was a South-East Asia specialist. I was one of those left-wing people in love with the wars of national liberation, and of course that’s why I did this book called *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, to try and understand how peasant revolutions happened. So, two things impressed me. The first thing is that peasants ideologically are not revolutionary. Peasants make revolutions because they want a little piece of land. They want to get out from under, let’s say debt, share-cropping debt, and so on. And so their aspirations are not very expansive. They will fight like crazy and die for tiny little gains which are actually important because they live at the edge. So, it struck me that the people who made revolutions, like artisans, weavers, shoemakers, and so on, that they ended up making revolutions in order to achieve what we consider non-revolutionary gains, but gains that make all the difference between living and dying, comfort and dignity, and so on. And then I, at the same time—that brought me a little to anarchism—I realized that Sékou Touré, Kwame Nkrumah, Ho Chi Minh, not to mention Lenin and Trotsky, and Mao, that when there was an actual revolution it was often the case that they created a stronger state that was able to fasten itself on its people and, and govern their lives more brutally in many ways than the ancien regime that they had, there was usually this moment with let’s say land reform and possibilities, and then a stronger state. Especially in the socialist bloc, one has to admit, I think. And so, I realised that my hopes for revolution were, if I was honest with myself, that they ended up not actually improving the freedom and autonomy of much of the population. It didn’t—the one thing that communist revolutions did actually, I think, you could say almost everywhere, was increase literacy. They actually did a good job at making a more literate population, and in some cases improving the distribution of healthcare. But I became disillusioned by the way in which revolutions produced a stronger state that was more oppressive than the one it replaced.

And then I guess, I found myself in Malaysia in a village for two years in which there was all kinds of class struggle, but it was not a revolutionary situation. It wasn’t a democratic setting

either, there were elections but they were fake elections. Nobody imagined that the ruling party, the United Malay nationalist organisation, could be replaced. So, all of the classes that I saw were these everyday struggles in order to stop the mechanisation of the harvest, in order to keep one's job, in order to shame and humiliate the rich, in order to make small gains, things like small-scale theft from the rich people, and efforts to make sure that the Islamic tithe [tax] that was essentially collected by rich people in the capital city, that they paid as little of that as possible, and if they paid it, it was with bad rice, with dirt and stones and things like that. So, that got me to thinking that for most of history, people have been operating in non-democratic settings in which given their local perspective their chances of changing the world, they imagine are extremely small. Sometime there's a cascade of these events when the world is changed.

But they're unlikely to realise it until it actually happens. And it seems to me that what we underestimate radically, and I mean radically, is how these, the aggregation of these small acts of resistance, whether it was desertion from armies, or whether it was poaching, from asserting claims to land and property, or whether it's land squatting, the occupation of land, these are struggles over food and life and property, and game and so on. And it seems to me that these are class struggles and they take place in a cautious, everyday way that doesn't result in what my asshole discipline political science sees as political activity. That is to say, there are no organisations, there are no banners, there are no petitions, there are no marches, there are no public demonstrations and so on. All of this kind of takes place with a subterranean understanding and collusion among people in the same situation, and they help one another and don't betray one another generally. And I realised that if you were to take a kind of world history of class struggle, this would be, I don't know, 75% of it. And we were, I make this point in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, we concentrate—political scientists and social scientists—concentrate on the visible patch of the spectrum of resistance. And I came to realise that this form of struggle below the radar on purpose, right, has probably constituted most of history's class struggle, and that's why it's important.

Stellan Vinthagen: But in understanding this, where did you draw then the intellectual inspiration from others? I mean partly you're saying Marxist thinking. But I guess also, rebels like Hobsbawm and Anarchists?

James C. Scott: Hobsbawm was really important to me, partly because what Hobsbawm did in *Primitive Rebels* is to understand things that were not seen as political as being political. You know, Jesse James, Robin Hood, taking from the rich and giving to the poor, right. This act for the poor. The problem with Hobsbawm of course is that, he calls them primitive rebels, and the only rebels who are really revolutionary are, as I understand it, Millenarian rebels who have a revolutionary view in mind. It's just that they think the change is going to be magical, while all they lack is the Leninist party that will give them the directions and make it secular. So, my problem with Hobsbawm is that all of this leads finally to the Leninist party as the only vehicle which can make the proletariat revolutionary. But what he does, which I think is a magnificent achievement, is to understand the way in which things we don't see as political are political. And somewhere he says, something I've always remembered, that 'peasants seek to work the system to their minimum disadvantage'. This expresses exactly what I was saying before. It's not revolutionary aspiration, they just want to minimise the terrible things that can happen to them. And the idea of working the system to their minimum disadvantage was important to me. And then, about the time I was reading that, I of course had read E.P. Thompson on poaching. And also Peter Linebaugh. And so, I realised that a lot of the sort of English struggle over land

and property, game and so on, and fish and firewood, took the same form of not being open politics. And then, to finish off, there was a wonderful—I forget the person's name, he died—and his book was published posthumously. And he was a black scholar historian and actually did this wonderful book on how the Confederacy collapsed because of two things that were not sufficiently recognised. One of them is that the Scots-Irish, which I am one of, who lived in the hills of Appalachia, they were not abolitionists, but they were not going to die to defend the property of the rich lowland people. So, once the war got really tough, they went home. They took their weapons and went home, they went to the hills and they could not be re-conscripted for the rest, for the duration of the war. And of course the blacks, on the plantations, there was something called the 20 Negro law, and it meant that if you had a plantation with 20 slaves, one of your sons could stay at home in order to keep order on the plantation and didn't have to serve in the Confederate army. So the poor white people in the south called this a rich man's war and a poor man's fight. And the blacks of course, they either when the frontlines got close, fled to the Union lines, or they sabotaged the southern plantation economy. So, between the flight of blacks and poor whites, and none of this—that's the important thing—none of this was seen as politics, right. And yet it brought down the Confederacy. So, I somehow thought, I wanted to dignify and understand how worthy this was of studying, even though—and I wanted people to understand that, that it was important that it not be open politics. That is its disguise. Its invisibility was part of why it was sometimes relatively successful.

Stellan Vinthagen: Right. And at this early time when you were getting inspiration to understand everyday resistance, you were not yet in contact with the people of the Subaltern Studies in India, like Guha, or?

James C. Scott: I was, I think it was when I was writing *Weapons of the Weak* that I was reading Ranajit Guha, and I mean, the nice thing about Subaltern Studies is that it is a very eclectic group. I mean there are lots of differences within Subaltern Studies. And I think *The Prose of Counterinsurgency* by Ranajit Guha is terrific. Although his great book is *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, his first book—I wrote this letter to Ranajit telling him how much his work meant to me and how much I liked him. We spent 6 weeks together in Australia, and saw *Antigone*, we spent every night talking to one another. And I loved the man—During the Czech Spring, the Prague Spring, he was working as a kind of official of the Communist Daily in Kolkata. And he, when he heard about the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of Dubcek from the Prague Spring, he typed a letter of resignation on his typewriter, left it in the typewriter and never came back. That's his story. Better than Hobsbawm, who remained a Communist until the end of his life.

Stellan Vinthagen: I wonder, why have you not connected explicitly to Foucault. Because in my mind, it seems like his writings about how power is dispersed into a network within the everyday in all kinds of relations in society, fit terribly well with your elaboration of everyday resistance as being a kind of micro-struggle of the everyday, in a form of class war in all kinds of relations.

James C. Scott: So, there are two answers to that question. First of all, I am deeply influenced by Foucault. I have read almost everything that Foucault has written. I am deeply influenced by him. This is a question of—it may just be a question of style that I have rationalised intellectually—but what I do not want to do is to write my books as if they were internal conversations between what my relationship is to Foucault, what my relationship is to Bourdieu, what my relationship is to de Certeau, and so on. I've learnt a lot from all these people. And yet I don't want this to

be an internal conversation between different theorists. Secondly, I have criticisms of Foucault, I'm sure Foucault would have a billion criticisms of me as well. Discipline and Punish and his lectures at the Collège de France I found enormously useful. My major problem with Foucault is that he promises to do a study of resistance, and never does. What he does is to show the kind of power, of power as dispersed, and deployed in a way that kind of creates the case for hegemony that seems to be unbreakable, right. And so, I think he delivers on his, I mean magnificently, on how power is deployed and dispersed and has been made scientific and clinical, and exact, and permeates everything. But if you believe all of that, then there's no place to stand to resist. And so, I think, that's the sort of thing that he promises to do and he probably could've. But he never did deliver on that particular promise, so I think of myself as providing a kind of, at least partially delivering on what he promised but didn't deliver on. And accepting the things that he did deliver, I mean, I couldn't have written *Seeing Like a State* without Foucault. But do I spend a lot of time mentioning Foucault, no? So, it's a question of audience. If you want people to read you who are spending all of their time saying X said this, Y said this, you know. There's a lot of literature that says, here's my relation to the following 10 thinkers. I don't wanna do that.

Stellan Vinthagen: No, I understand. Thank you. Let's move to another topic. In your definition of everyday resistance, class stands out as being very important, the intention of a class antagonistic ambition among those who do everyday resistance. But why is class and not domination or power key? Because we could imagine gender, race, or other things that could be key here.

James C. Scott: Well I mean in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* I spend a fair amount of time talking about slaves, slave resistance, right? So that's race and class together. That is a subordinated class of people who aren't free. So it's not that I ignore race, ethnicity and so on. Although I'm dealing with it in the context of people who are oppressed. For lack of a better word. Where were you headed with your question?

Stellan Vinthagen: Yes, but why do you then highlight class in your definition?

James C. Scott: Well I guess, as a matter of fact it seems to me that the worst instances of class in, in most societies that we're familiar with over the last two centuries, people recognised that people who were not of the same class were nonetheless homo sapiens and entitled to some consideration as homo sapiens, right. They felt that they shouldn't be degraded etcetera etcetera. If you get historically, as you often had, the idea that untouchables and Adivasis in India are less than fully human, the Jews are less than fully human, the blacks are less than fully human, then you combine a kind of class oppression with a dehumanisation that allows a kind of exploitation to take on a kind of extra power in which these people's lives are not worth much. And so it seems to me that that combination of class plus race has produced more horrors than pure class has. Don't you think? I don't know.

Stellan Vinthagen: That makes sense. But then it seems like you are using class in a broader sense than the Marxist understanding of class as "the workers"?

James C. Scott: Well I'm thinking of people whose surplus product is extracted. I mean if we're talking about slaves, or serfs and so on, the Marxist calculus of the appropriation of surplus production follows, I think. I mean thinking about this with respect to, I have my students read this book by Nash, anyway, it's this argument that —it's a very optimistic argument—that people we do not consider to be humans have in the past couple of centuries come to be human after all. So you know, women, and children, and serfs and blacks, and now in Germany primates have certain rights, right, almost like human beings. There's this argument that there is this growing

circle of compassion, of sentient beings that are entitled to rights that are comparable to human rights, who before were outside, in the dark, were not fully human and could neither be treated as human, and could also be abused because they weren't fully human. They didn't have rights. And so, if you're an optimist in all of these things, then you can imagine, you know, why stop at primates? Why don't we know a lot about the intelligence of octopus, of ravens and crows and certain kinds of birds, and so, I mean I actually think that the great thing about indigenous peoples historically is that they didn't believe in monotheism. And they believe that the whole world was enchanted, that everything, you know, the streams and forests and hills and animals, and tigers and elephants, all had a kind of agency of their own and were entitled to a kind of respect for their agency. And I think that if you're an environmentalist then you're very fond of this enchanted world where natural objects are entitled to some respect just because they're not seen to be inert, dead things but to have a kind of agency. I mean it's a little romantic, I guess.

Stellan Vinthagen: Your connection here would be then that there is an expanded circle of those being counted as humans, as having rights?

James C. Scott: That's the argument. That's the optimistic argument. I'm not sure I believe it, I'm just sort of saying that, that the idea of the circle of things worthy of our respect, things that would have rights, that we could imagine as having rights has expanded. I don't think there is any doubt about that.

Stellan Vinthagen: And then there would not be a class in that meaning of being possible to exploit, or?

James C. Scott: No, you can still exploit them but, I guess I'm arguing that the worst Russian feudal landowners who had whole villages who were enserfed to them were able to exploit those people, but they recognised their humanity nonetheless, even if they exploited them. And so I'm saying that if, once, once you admit the humanity of people you're oppressing, that they are at some level the same kind of sentient being as you are. Then I guess—I'm thinking off the top of my head—there are certain things that you may not do to them without degrading yourself, OK. You may do them, but you understand that you are degrading yourself. So in a sense, the trick of certain kinds of racism and discrimination is to convince people that these people are not human. The gypsies, the blacks, the Jews and so on, you can treat them like objects.

Stellan Vinthagen: So, in that way, racism or sexism is used to increase the possibilities of class exploitation?

James C. Scott: Correct. Then you have to then see them not just as a class but kind of, as a separate species. The only good Jew is a dead Jew, that kind of thing that people believe.

Stellan Vinthagen: Or the only good Indian is a dead Indian. So, you would maintain then that for you in the definition, class would still be central?

James C. Scott: Yes. I'm reminded of the, wasn't it historically true that in early modern Europe, that to kill one's wife was a lesser crime than to kill a man of the same status, and a wife who killed her husband, I think the French term for this was *petit regicide*, that you killed your king.

Stellan Vinthagen: Right, it was treason. A small treason.

James C. Scott: So, there you can see the way in which the difference in levels of humanity play into this.

Stellan Vinthagen: To continue with the definition here, or your core understanding of what is everyday resistance

[**James C. Scott:** I'm making this up as I go along].

Stellan Vinthagen: you have some basis to make it up [laughing]. So, I'm thinking about how you put such a strong emphasis on that everyday resistance has to be hidden or disguised. In my understanding it makes total sense that, in certain repressive situations, to be hidden and disguised, is part of the genius of everyday resistance, to pretend to be loyal but finding ways of doing resistance anyway. And through that, avoid the often-devastating consequences of punishment when you are detected. However, in other circumstances, like for example in the liberal America or Sweden, much of everyday resistance is happening very publicly, like when people are vegans. Or when people do everyday resistance although employers know that they work slow, or don't work very well when there is no supervisor present. So, then the everyday resistance is known. "ere seems to be an aspect of everyday resistance that is not really disguised or hidden very much. So, my question is, does it have to be hidden or disguised to count as everyday resistance, or are there forms of everyday resistance that are not hidden or disguised?

James C. Scott: By my definition, no, because then it's not hidden, or it's not everyday. That which I understand as everyday resistance can't speak its name, or which decides not to speak its name. So there are two things. When you have the possibility in the sort of post-French revolution in which every citizen has legal rights to expression and so on. Then the importance and rationale of everyday resistance declines, because you can speak your mind and the consequences are not quite so severe as they were. It is in a sense less honourable to hide in a system in which you are not gonna be imprisoned or shot once you express your opinion. It's also true that even when in the situations I understand to be typical of everyday forms of resistance, let's say slavery, the pressure and the degradation and humiliations are such that a certain portion of these people explode. And this results in the expression in America: 'He's a bad nigger'. Which means he'll just fight the master or he will tell the master to go fuck himself. And all the blacks love this bad nigger because he's saying what they want to say most of the time. They understand that he endangers everybody, and that everybody's going to pay the price and that's why he's killed, or thrashed, or put in jail and so on. So, there's that combination of 'yes, he speaks for us, oh my god'. That's why, let's say a slave mother, does the job of the ruling class by teaching her child to be polite, to not lose his temper. I was very impressed with this thing called "The Dozens." It precedes hip-hop and rap, it's trading of insults among blacks, The Dozens, like: 'oh, your mother fucks the mayor', 'your mother wears army boots', right. And then the other person would insult your mother. 'yo momma' was the way it was. Anyway, I understood by other people who understood this, that this was a way of self-training to absorb insults without fighting, just giving back with insults rather than become violent. And the idea is that to grow up black was to be able to absorb insults and not break down. And this insulting one another was a part of the training. You show you're really a tough fucker by just keep receiving and giving insults and never losing your temper. It's an emotional control which I think is required. And you could say, I think that we're getting on a different territory, but it seems to me that's something that lots of women learnt as well. How to control their temper and how to placate the angry husband or man. Because I actually believe that the fact is that the average man can physically dominate the average woman, I think this physical fact permeates gender relations. It's just there in the background. And that most women adapt accordingly, and make allowances for this because they don't wanna get hurt, right. It would be really nice actually if one could go from that starting point and acknowledge it, where a part of the marriage ceremonial commitment would be, 'I understand I could beat the shit out of you, but I promise to never do it. I promise never to use my physical force', right. If that makes sense. I was criticised in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* for not dealing with women.

And I didn't, partly because I didn't have anything particularly original to say that feminists were not already saying. But I also didn't deal with women because it's different to class, in the sense that—I will criticise myself in a second—but I thought then that the difference between women and men's relationships and class relationships are that you can imagine a class or an ethnic group being a complete society all by itself. Although, you can't really imagine women or men being complete societies in themselves. They need one another. And in the course of needing one another, they produce an interest that they have in common, namely children, right. And so it seems to me that it has to be treated as, the relationship is radically different in some ways, right. Now, to criticise myself I guess I've been convinced that in much of the world, women and men actually do live in completely different spheres and come together just to procreate. And they spend their days completely apart, it's just a purely procreational relationship, right. So it looks more like ethnic groups, except they do produce children.

Stellan Vinthagen: But just to return to what we were talking about before; you would still count it as everyday resistance if women were doing hidden and disguised resistance?

James C. Scott: All the time. Yes, it seems to me that women, being physically weaker and oppressed historically, have learned to work around the egos of men, just the way the slave did. It matters a lot for the slave to be able to read the mood of their master. Their day depends a lot on being able to work around the mood of their master, and for the master it doesn't matter. They don't have to read the mood of the slave. And I think for women, they've had to read the mood of their man in order to avoid problems, survive, manipulate, right, get what they need etcetera. So, all of those things we think of feminine wiles are a product of placating I think, right.

Stellan Vinthagen: Just to continue on a similar line, when you describe everyday resistance in your different texts, it is very clear how it can be creative and innovative when it comes to finding ways of cutting corners and undermining when it's possible, when you're not being detected by work slow and pretending to misunderstand and all that, sabotage and whatever. But you don't describe as much the possibility of everyday resistance to create more proactive, self-governing autonomous institutions that can strengthen the subaltern group. Do you see that as part of everyday resistance, or is that something completely different for you?

James C. Scott: Yes. Except that it can't declare itself. So, for example, let's say with poaching, how do you know poaching isn't just the desire of someone to have rabbit stew, because it tastes good? And why should we treat this as a kind of class thing, rather than just theft. Well, first of all, because you don't. Theft from the people of the same class is not tolerated, you'll get beaten to shit if you do. And if you're poaching on aristocratic land, none of your village neighbours will ever go to court and give witness against you. And we know in general from folk sayings, that god created the commons for everybody, right, that there's an atmosphere of solidarity that is acted in practice by game wardens never being able to get a villager to testify against another villager. So, there you have evidence of complicity and a kind of tacit coordination, and agreement—it never has to take a formal form—but it actually protects everybody. Because they know that if they take a rabbit from aristocratic land their neighbours are not gonna screw them. So that idea, it can create a climate of opinion, and maybe it's whispered at the tavern and so on. And heroes like Robin Hood and so on are celebrated. It's a kind of culture, it's a kind of solidarity. But it's not formalised. So, I think, you see, I think that when you get what you would think of as a sort of public display of solidarity, what you're seeing is one of those rare moments in which this complicity which is generalised suddenly bursts to the surface, right, in a crisis, and it displays

itself. But it wouldn't exist if there wasn't the other nine-tenths of the iceberg that had been created by practical acts of solidarity.

If people go on strike in a factory they go on strike because they have the relations of solidarity with the people on the next machine, the people they go drinking with. They are talking all the time about how they hate the fucking bosses, how they're not well-paid, how the factory is dirty and dangerous and so on. So when you get an uprising and an actual strike, you're seeing the kind of visible poking through of the quiet fabric that this creates, I think. You don't get the things you're interested in without the things that are left unspoken.

Stellan Vinthagen: So, you're saying that the fabric of solidarity that is tacit is kind of the culture from where

[**James C. Scott:** the foundation],

Stellan Vinthagen: the foundation which makes the eruptions of the mass mobilisations and public protest possible?

James C. Scott: And it's created every day in non-crisis situations. Now what's missing from this as people have pointed out to me, it's just a criticism of my work I think, that these kinds of techniques are the techniques of power as well. So, a friend of mine has this thing what he calls street-level bureaucracy. In Massachusetts for example, this was like 15 years ago, they wanted to diminish the welfare expenditure. But they didn't want to change the law, because that would have created a public crisis, a lot of opposition.

So instead of actually changing the law and changing the entitlements, they made sure that the forms were as long as possible, they made sure that the hours the offices were open were most inconvenient for women and children and so on. They made it that if you failed one step you had to go back and start from zero, they tightened the requirements and so on. And so they, in a sense, they fiddled with the details of applying for welfare, so that they could guarantee that only 2 out of 10 would ever make it to the candy store. And the rest would sort of quit and drop out and so on, but they would never formally deny them benefits. So that's the way in which power actually uses these same kinds of techniques of subversion. In which your rights are not taken away but your use of them, you know. I have this experience in a little small way, I was fucked over by the flight from Adelaide to Sydney, I had to stay an extra day because although I moved quickly the flight I'd booked had already gone by the time I got to the international desk at Sydney. So I had to stay in a hotel. If I want to collect the money for that hotel stay, United Airlines is gonna require two hours of my time describing all the details, the arrival times and so on. And they do this in order to make sure that almost nobody gets to the candy store. I know they've designed an application form for hotel fees in order to make it almost impossible.

Stellan Vinthagen: Publicly having the right but in practice not having the right.

James C. Scott: Exactly.

Stellan Vinthagen: But if I understand you correct, you're saying that in the process of doing everyday resistance there is the creation of some kind of culture of self-rule, autonomy, that it becomes like a resource?

James C. Scott: It's absolutely essential. It wouldn't exist without it. It wouldn't exist without it. So, this kind of everyday resistance, the desertion that I talk of, the squatting on the land and so on. All of this requires a sort of complicity and tacit cooperation that's not sort of public but, which is the tissue, binding all these people together.

Stellan Vinthagen: Would it be to go too far to say that that kind of tissue, that kind of foundation is then the basis of what everyone else is talking about when it comes to strikes,

protests and mobilisations, but they don't see it, that this everyday resistance is behind this but they are focusing on the public articulations of it.

James C. Scott: Sure, you could say that. In the sense that every strike, when the strike arrives and you decide whether you're gonna stay at your machine or you're gonna go out on strike, you've got to do one thing or another. Your decision depends, I think, in a fundamental way on how your social relations are with the people who are going out on strike, as opposed to the boss or the foreman or so on. Maybe if you need the money and your children are starving you're not gonna go out on strike. But the point is, whether you go out on strike or not is dependent on all these other things, these social network ties and loyalties that get paraded along the way.

Stellan Vinthagen: But it seems to me, I don't know if you would agree on that, that different places in the world although the repression is severe, we find not the same amount or the same level of everyday resistance everywhere, right? Or is it just that we haven't found it yet? Because it seems like in some places there is a very high level of everyday resistance, like for example among the Palestinians who call their everyday resistance *sumud*, there is a whole culture of everyday resistance, people relate to it very explicitly, whereas in other places it seems like it's more difficult to actually detect it. Or? I think I'm saying, is this variation only a matter of degrees of power?

James C. Scott: Again, I haven't thought seriously about this, but my guess is that, let's say to take the Palestinian case, these people have been living with the daily presence of surveillance, oppression, danger and so on, for the last 40 or 50 years. And so they have always had to work around these situations. So, what I think I'm avoiding, and I may be wrong, but my guess is that there are not any strong cultural influences in terms of how people respond to oppression. I do not believe that the Buddhists are more long-suffering than the Tamils, or the Muslims, or the Christians, or the Hindus are more long-suffering than the Japanese, or Chinese and so on. I don't think so, at least I would have to have that demonstrated to me. I think it's a question of practice and experience. And there are people who are oppressed at a distance, where the actual presence of the oppression is less personalised, is less immediate, is less oppressive in a daily sense. I mean, if you're a slave working in the fields and you have a foreman on a horse with a whip next to you the whole day, that's a different situation to if you're a sharecropper who controls your own working day, but at the end of the year you have to give half your harvest to that man. It seems to me that the first one is a situation that is perceived as more degrading and more repulsive.

Stellan Vinthagen: So basically, that decides the basis of practice, how things evolve more or less? It is the form of domination or power that will determine how everyday resistance will be articulated?

James C. Scott: That's my guess.

Stellan Vinthagen: I'm interested to know, what's your take on the development of what could today be called a field of "resistance studies", as an academic field? You coined the concept in the mid-80s and many people have taken it up out of inspiration in the studies about everyday resistance. And now there is a *Journal of Resistance Studies*, and there are people who are referring to the field and are relating to it. Of course, it's still a very emerging, small field. But what's your take on it? Is it a positive development that we're getting a field that is referring to resistance studies, or should we be cautious about that, are there dangers?

James C. Scott: Well, there must be a hundred books called "resistance" and "revolution." And it's interesting that they're treated as separate nouns. Resistance is not the same as revolution, resistance already in a semiotic way assumes that there is some pressure, right, that you are

resisting being pushed or being moved in a certain direction. So, resistance implies a kind of relation of opposing forces, in an important way. Revolution is the magical evaporation of the other term, of resistance. Which is defeated, right. And then you make a new order. And that's fair enough. So I think that, in a sense the understanding of resistance is probably more important than the understanding of revolution. That's why I think it's a worthy theme. And then you have people whom I think have very capable analyses of resistance studies, like Gene Sharp, who tries to sort of describe every species of resistance and its tactics and its advantages and disadvantages, the circumstances under which it arose, and from those taxonomies it seems to me that there's a lot of theory that could possibly flow. I know all this stuff about how the Bavarian Germans resisted Nazism by keeping the crosses in the schools, you know, and Hitler finally gave up and allowed them to keep the crosses in the schools. It's seen as a resistance to Nazism. So from the taxonomies of different kinds of resistance, one can say well, what sort of symbolic resistance, to what extent does it encourage people, to what extent does it encourage the moral high ground, to what extent does it help to mobilise people who suddenly feel as if they can have an influence on their situation, when they are not doing it publicly.

Stellan Vinthagen: Are there certain things that you feel like are particularly important for a field like this to put focus on, that we don't know yet that has been ignored or not been studied enough?

James C. Scott: The things that for me seem potentially theoretically, analytically rich, are the detailed descriptions of practical resistance. What people were saying and doing and so on. For example, you know the, what is it,

I cite this work in *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, but I can't remember the author's, Francois [Rochat]. Anyway, they did the study of Stanley Milgram, the Milgram experiments done at Yale. Because there's an archive, so they came for the archive, and they studied this village of Le Chambon. You know they saved 4000–6000 Jews. I'll describe what they describe and tell you why I think it's theoretically important. So it was a Huguenot village, and the pastors were Huguenot, and they had saved a few people from Mussolini's Italy and some people from Franco's Spain. And the Huguenots know something about persecution, so they were sympathetic in general. So the Huguenot pastors and their wives went around from house to house to house and said, Jews are going to be coming this way, would you help to hide Jews in your barn, feed them etcetera etcetera. And almost all of the people said 'I'd like to, but I have a family, I have children, if they discover that I'm hiding Jews they'll kill me and kill my family. And I can't risk my family. So I'm sorry I can't do it.' And then the Huguenot pastors were taken off to the camps—they survived actually. Then the Jews just started arriving, and the wives of the pastors went back to the same houses where they were turned down. But this time they went with, let's say a Jewish family, and said 'Would you feed these people and hide them overnight and give them warm coats?' Now they had to look someone in the eye and say no. And most of them said yes. Reluctantly, but they did it. And after they did it once, they were committed to helping Jews for the rest of the war. So, that was interesting to me. I found that extraordinarily powerful in the sense that, it's a little like what EP Thompson says about class consciousness. It's not as if people become conscious and then do things with bad consciousness. It's like the practical struggles over ships biscuits, and food and so on, in the end it develops into a class consciousness. In this case having to turn down an actual human being and deny them the solidarity that might save their life, people were unwilling to do that. And they then drew the conclusions of their act and became committed to helping Jews. They didn't become convinced that they should help Jews and then helped Jews,

they helped Jews and drew the conclusions from their act of solidarity. You see what I mean? That teaches us something about how the human heart works and how solidarity works, and it doesn't work the way most intellectuals think it works, which is by the head before the heart.

Stellan Vinthagen: And this is an example of what is needed to be studied, right? It's showing as you say then, something that would only be detected in a detailed study?

James C. Scott: Correct. And it seems to me you know, half the Trump voters if you ask them would they like to murder all the people wearing hijabs or Muslims, they'd say 'yes, sure, burn them all, send them all away, put them all in prison', whatever. You actually bring a little Islamic family shaking with fear and so on to their door and half of them are going to say, 'Oh maybe I'll give you some soup'. It seems to me that it's easier to hate abstractly than it is to hate in concrete.

Stellan Vinthagen: And in an equivalent way then, we learn resistance in a practical way, not in an abstract way?

James C. Scott: Exactly, exactly.

Stellan Vinthagen: Great. So, when it comes to the study of resistance, how would you if you allow me to ask this in a more personal way—over the years have you changed your mind and learnt something quite different over the years about resistance? Could you give an example, if that's the case?

James C. Scott: It's a good question. And I'm not sure I have an adequate answer. But I guess the thing that impresses me, and maybe this is because of the ecological crisis that we're in, is that homo sapiens is incapable of thinking much beyond a single lifespan. That's to say their time horizon is very short, it is limited to at best, at the most expansive, children, parents and grandparents, three generations. So, it seems to me that when you think of ecological time, or river time, or forest time and so on, I guess I'm impressed that everything is moving even though it doesn't seem as if it's moving. So, after the last glacial maximum, as everything warmed and the glaciers melted, if you had one of these time lapse photographs of every decade or every hundred years, you'd see beech trees and oak trees marching north from the Mediterranean, conquering new territories, bringing all their new animals, and the soil with them and so on. I mean that's the problem with economists right, they're even worse because they think you're maximising transaction by transaction. People don't do that, but if they're maximising, they're maximising probably for a single lifetime and so on. So why shouldn't I get my savings and investments and have a good retirement, even though it's fucking up the forests in Indonesia and Mozambique? And taking gold and silver, and ores and destroying rivers, and so on. It's both invisible and it's at a distance and it takes a long time. And I don't think we're very good at moral reasoning over the short run.

Well you asked me how my attitude for resistance has changed, and I guess I'm more depressed by the fact that the time horizon and human maximisation is so short sighted, all right. And that's what's gotten us into our fix, right. Yes, I win this struggle, but what are its consequences for the long run future of lots of other people, and different classes of different people? I mean it's too bad in the sense that you know, you know when I think of Yale. What is Yale doing in the world? It thinks it's just of course educating a new elite. But the fact is it's got a 22 fucking billion-dollar endowment that it's maximising the return over. And it probably is having negative effects on the world of a massive kind. And are the undergraduates up in arms about it, are the faculty up in arms about it, is there resistance to that? No, they want to make sure that their scholarship is good for next year.

Stellan Vinthagen: So, the kind of resistance that we engage in, be that everyday resistance or something else, it's very short sighted?

James C. Scott: Yeah. You know, I think it's really hard to get people to think, it requires that you think on behalf of rivers and forests and salmon, and all kinds of life forms which are not directly in any immediate way strapped to your outcomes.

And I see a connection here, and that is also to what we talked about before, indigenous people. Because I mean, they are people that have been doing resistance over hundreds of years, and they tend to think more in longer terms. I mean I know that native Americans talk about the sevendecision principle.

What's interesting of course is how much of that is a romantic self-presentation and how much of it is deeply experienced. I have a student— she's not entirely my student—but she's a Malay woman from Singapore. And she wears a hijab. And she's interested in how it changed the Batak world view, people in Sumatra and Malaysia. She's interested in the shift from Paganism, pre-modern indigenous religions, to monotheism, Islam in her case, and what it does for your view of nature and your relationship to the environment. It's a very brave thing to be doing because her conclusions are quite negative about what monotheism does, in terms of your idea of the domination of nature and your relationship to the natural forces around you. And so, I find it interesting that even someone like that is conscious of and admiring of the fact that for indigenous people the world is enchanted. I mean at least for traditionally indigenous people; each tree and each mountain and stream have its own kind of spirit. And so, it's more respectful of the natural world, at least in theory.

Stellan Vinthagen: At least for those who still value that tradition. Which is not everyone as we know.

James C. Scott: Well, how can you expect anything else from a generation that spends 90% of its time looking at a screen and their iPhone and so on, and not even when they're walking along a sidewalk, they pay attention to nature. No, they've got their earphones and they're walking, right on forward.

Stellan Vinthagen: [Laughing] That's a good point to end. Thank you for giving so generously of your time.

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