COMMENTARY

EVERYDAY PEASANT RESISTANCE 'SEEN FROM BELOW': THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH OF JAMES C. SCOTT

Peasant rebellion and protest have interested many social scientists in the West since the Vietnamese War. While they have emphasized the role of political parties and collective, organized action, they have tended to underestimate the workings of politics outside formal structures. Collective and organized actions by unions and individuals have been praised, but the fact that peasants have a way of fighting of their own has largely been ignored.

One of the very few people in the field of political anthropology not to have overlooked this is James C. Scott. Not only has he examined the nature and forms of day-to-day peasant resistance, he also claims that these forms are a legitimate and effective, if not a better, means of defending their interests against the state. For Scott, it is wrong to suppose that subordinate classes are dominated to such an extent as to render autonomous and resistant subcultures impossible (1985: 335). He believes these classes can and do offer resistance even though apparently resigning themselves to their lot.

This essay aims at presenting Scott's anthropological approach, which deals especially with the unwritten history of resistance in a village in Malaysia and the consequences of peasant resistance on class relations. I shall be discussing mainly his *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985), in which this approach is most evident. This is the product of two years of fieldwork in a Malay village in the northwest Malaysian state of Kedah. The village, to which Scott gave the name 'Sedaka', is a rice-farming community which, like many other villages in Southeast Asia, has been sucked into the Green Revolution.

In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott challenges our concepts of resistance and thrusts at us point-blank the question of just what resistance is. Not only does he force us to re-examine our preconceived ideas of resistance, he also pleads for a broadening of the conventional understanding of the term:

> Lower class resistance among peasants is any act(s) by member(s) of the class that is (are) intended either to mitigate or to deny claims (e.g. rents, taxes, deference) made on that class by superordinate classes (e.g. landlords, the state, owners of machinery, money-lenders) or to advance their own claims (e.g. work, land, charity, respect) *vis-à-vis* these superordinate classes (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986: 22).

In view of this definition, foot-dragging, non-compliance, deception, stealing, pilfering, sabotage, slander and gossip all have to be seen as legitimate forms of resistance. In Scott's opinion, there are several reasons why these forms are chosen in the so-called Third World. The social structure of the peasantry in these countries is such that they are scattered across the countryside and lack formal organization. Consequently, peasants engage in informal, low-profile techniques of resistance which - although making no headlines - can accumulate and become an effective force in helping them obtain whatever they are fighting for.

It is rare in such countries for peasants to risk an outright confrontation with the authorities over development policies, taxation etc. Whereas outright, organized action has proved to be dangerous, if not suicidal, throughout peasant history, informal networks within the village allow messages to be passed on implicitly. Individual acts requiring little or no co-ordination or planning are thus the most suitable tactics.

A precondition for comprehending the forms of resistance the peasantry engage in is a full understanding of their decision-making processes. According to Scott, the conventional hierarchy of status among the rural poor - smallholder, tenant, wage-labourer - can be explained more effectively by the principle of subsistence security than by increments in average income (Scott 1976: 37). The economy of the peasant is based on a subsistence ethic. The peasant living so close to the margins of subsistence is in constant fear of food shortages. His need for a reliable livelihood dictates his decision-making behaviour. Instead of going for big profits, which may be lucrative but risky, he chooses to apply the 'safety-first' principle, thereby avoiding the failure that may ruin him. This means preferring to use certain varieties of seeds or particular techniques of production so as to reduce the probability of disaster, instead of attempting to maximize his average return (ibid.: 5).

The smallholder is most secure because he directly possesses his means of subsistence. He may get a lower average rate of return than a wage labourer, but he still prefers the security of his land to the uncertainties of the labour market. Likewise, his tenancy is preferred because of its link to a patron who is expected to help in a crisis and has to provide a minimum for the tenant's

subsistence.

Scott also points out that in areas where traditional village patterns are still dominant, the social strength of the subsistence ethic endows the village with protective power. Institutionalized patterns of social control and norms of reciprocity allow for the minimal needs of the village poor. The rich in the village receive legitimation only to the extent that they are generous to the poor. They are also expected to sponsor celebrations at weddings and other local rituals, extend charity to neighbours and those in need, and even provide employment to those seeking work - indeed, they must fulfil these implicit needs of the village, lest they become the object of malicious gossip and slander. Stories of bad landlords can at times turn into effective propaganda against them and have disastrous results: for example, 'the mention of Haji Broom's name by the poor villagers conjures up a vision of the greedy, penny-pinching rich, who likewise violate the accepted standards of village conduct' (Scott 1985: 23). The story of Sedaka itself has proved the effectiveness of 'character assassination' as a social weapon. Scott explores the language of resistance in a chapter entitled 'The Vocabulary of Exploitation' (1985: Ch. 6). His command of the Malay language is impressive, and he takes the reader into the quarrels of Sedaka, providing an insight into the way words are used as a form of resistance.

The subsistence ethic also causes peasants to develop a notion of equality. The struggle between rich and poor is therefore not merely a struggle over work, property rights and cash, but 'a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labelled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame' (ibid.: xvii).

On the other hand, links of kinship, friendship and patronage and other alliances in the village only allow peasants a small leeway in which they can act. The fear of repression and the survival of the household are additional factors determining the kind of options available to them. More often than not they prefer to use 'avoidance protest' (see Adas 1981) - flight - as a way out rather than risk an outright confrontation with their class superiors. This form of resistance seems to be historically significant in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia, in view of its demographic and social structure.

To appreciate why peasants choose the so-called 'garden-variety' forms of resistance - arson, sabotage, boycotts, disguised strikes, theft etc. - it is helpful to consider the kind of agricultural transformation taking place in Kedah during the first years of the Green Revolution. Although the Green Revolution was to have an impact on almost every facet of peasant life, on the whole the changes it brought about were experienced gradually, in the form of shifts in land-tenure and in agricultural techniques. For example, the introduction of fixed rents, payable before the planting, affected tenants adversely. However, they were, on the whole, able to hold on to their tenancy, at least for a few seasons, even though this created an additional burden of debt. In this way there were only a handful of victims at a time, discouraging collective defiance. Mechanization, in the form of the huge combine

harvesters introduced as part of the Green Revolution Scheme, has also caused harm. Rather than directly exploiting the poor, it removed them from the production process. Rich farmers and landlords could afford to hire combine harvesters or lease the harvest work to outsiders for a fixed sum. Although genuine efforts to stop the introduction of combine harvesters were reported throughout Kedah, they failed to prevent the implementation of mechanization.

These many transformations have severed the bonds of economic interdependence between agrarian classes. Whereas in the past rich landlords had to secure labourers at the appropriate time by giving them modest gifts and loans, nowadays they do not have to listen to the pleas of their tenants, nor negotiate or show kindness towards them. These new forms of capitalist activity have destroyed the traditional patron-client relationship and overturned the moral values of village life. Profit maximization and property rights have taken over from moral obligations, and the social harmony of the village has been destroyed.

The pattern of capitalist development in Sedaka has not only resulted in a growing maldistribution of income, the polarization of rich and poor, and the breaking of customary social ties, it has also increased the role of politics in peasant life. An important factor here is that the dominant political party, UMNO (United Malay Nationalists' Organization), an exclusively Malay party, depends largely on Malay votes to keep it in power. As most of the peasants are overwhelmingly Malay, this has a direct bearing on government strategies and development projects. UMNO's efforts to secure its political base in the rural areas are reflected in policies aimed at benefiting the rice-producers. A major political opposition party, PAS (Partai Islam), has also emerged, exploiting 'fears' of the economically influential Chinese community. PAS and UMNO were at one point competing with each other for control. Against this background, the case of Sedaka has to be seen as typical of Malay villages but not necessarily of Chinese ones.[1]

The introduction of state policies, or 'soft options', as Scott calls them, has especially widened the gulf between rich and poor. For example, government-sponsored resettlement schemes in the form of rubber and oil-palm estates did not resettle the poorest, and settler selection was highly politicized. While direct government subsidies in the form of fertilizers and production loans were distributed, this was done on the basis of acreage farmed, which in turn benefited the large-scale commercial producers. The overall impact of state intervention has made the state a direct participant and decision-maker in peasant life. Agriculture in this sense is controlled by the government. The schedule of water in irrigation schemes, for example, provides a basis for direct confrontation between government and peasantry. In addition, the pro-Malay policies of the government of Malaysia have created an instant Malay commercial class which has become a new 'protected species' of the petty bourgeoisie. These 'state-sponsored

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[1] For a brilliant account of local-level politics in Chinese villages in Malaysia, see Strauch 1981.

capitalists' operate with special licences in protected markets and receive guaranteed credit from public loan funds. They are parasites of the state. Anyone familiar with the politics of Malaysia would attest to the kind of corruption and scandals that exist there.

In the final two chapters of *Weapons of the Weak* Scott makes use of the history of resistance in Sedaka to show that peasants have a form of 'trade unionism without trade unions' and to criticize the Marxist concepts of hegemony and false consciousness. Walkouts and strikes, contrary to what is generally believed, do take place in the village. The restraint the poor impose on one another not to act as strike-breakers provides them with a sense of solidarity. Together with the use of social sanctions such as gossip, public shunning etc., such acts of resistance are very powerful, especially in the long run. In conditions where power and the possibility of repression make open acts of disrespect dangerous, gossip can be a kind of 'democratic voice', and shame a very strong means of punishment.

Summing up his case for everyday forms of peasant resistance, Scott attacks the utopian ideal of collective and organized action. He says that the privileged status accorded to organized movements 'flows from either of two political orientations: Leninist, or preference for open, institutionalized politics' (1985: 297). The debate he raises here is, must resistance be based on principled, selfless and collective actions? What about the basic material survival needs of the household? Is a self-indulgent, individual act not to be regarded as real resistance? Scott believes the combination of self-interest and resistance are the vital forces animating the resistance of peasants and proletarians. To ignore the self-interested element in peasant resistance is to ignore the determinant context of peasant politics. Yet the individual and often anonymous quality of peasant resistance has received far less historical attention.

The examination of class relations in Sedaka further suggests that the concept of hegemony or ideological domination requires a fundamental rethink. Here, Scott argues that the 'notion of hegemony and its related concepts of false consciousness, mystification and ideological state apparatus not only fail to make sense of class relations in Sedaka, but are just as likely to mislead us seriously in understanding class conflict in most situations' (1985: 317).

Scott makes a number of points in this connection. First, he believes that, contrary to what is often supposed, most subordinate classes are able to penetrate the prevailing ruling ideology. However, this penetration of official reality by the poor may be overlooked if we observe only the superficial public encounters between the rich and the poor, that is, their 'on-stage' behaviour, and ignore entirely the insinuations beneath the surface, that is, the 'off-stage' behaviour that occurs daily.

Secondly, theories of hegemony often equate what is inevitable with what is just. Scott sees this as an error, and he criticizes authors like Richard Hoggart (1954) and Barrington Moore (1978) for failing to provide any convincing logic for the process by which the inevitable becomes just. He goes on to show by way of an analogy - the weather, which is surely inevitable and unavoidable - that what is inevitable cannot automatically be considered just or legitimate. On the contrary, the inevitability of the weather has not stopped traditional cultivators from performing rituals to influence its course.

Thirdly, Scott argues that any hegemonic ideology provides within itself the raw material for contradictions and conflicts. In Sedaka, for example, 'the precondition of their [the landowners'] new wealth has been the systematic dismantling of the practices that previously rationalized their wealth, status and leadership. Their economic domination has come at the cost of their social standing and of their social control of their poorer neighbours' (1985: 345).

Fourthly, Scott questions Gramsci and other Marxist scholars who argue that revolutionary action can follow only from a thoroughly radical consciousness that is not only opposed to the dominant ideology, but also striving towards an entirely new order. According to these scholars, the role of the vanguard party is to mobilize the working class, which by itself is not 'able to rise above an incoherent and fragmentary conception of its situation' (ibid.: 341). Scott does a brilliant job here in tearing down these assumptions by means of examples. Interestingly, he uses Moore's analysis of German workers in the Ruhr after World War I to support his case. Moore says of these workers (1978: 351): 'over and over again the evidence reveals that the mass of workers was not revolutionary. They did not want to overturn the existing social order .... ' What they wanted rather, was something new that amounted to their perception of the old order minus the disagreeable and oppressive features. Such examples show that the objectives for change were reformist in nature, not revolutionary.

Scott has been criticized by a number of scholars, such as Christine White (1986: 53), who claims that his approach 'does not help in explaining the power relationship between the peasants and the power structures', because it is the power structures that are more crucial in determining the success or failure of resistance'. Talib (1987), supporting White, even goes so far as to say that 'searching for everyday peasant resistance in the social reality is a futile business'.

This commentary, on the other hand, has tried to show that Scott's approach, in looking at politics outside formalized structures, that is, at everyday forms of peasant resistance, actually helps to explain class relations. He has built a case for the existence of this form of resistance by viewing things from the bottom. Seeing all historical resistance by subordinate classes as

being 'rooted firmly in the homely but meaningful realities of daily experience' (1985: 348), he has forced us to reconsider our ideas on resistance. *Weapons of the Weak* has certainly opened up new ways of looking at peasant rebellion.

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