

Primitive Resistance: An Advanced Concept?

Introduction

In this essay, I will examine James Scott's concept of 'primitive resistance', an expression of 'infrapolitics', as outlined in 'Beyond the war of words'¹ and 'The infrapolitics of subordinate groups'². Once I have described what Scott means by these terms, I will explain which specific aspects of primitive resistance I find appealing or concerning and why. My main argument consists of three criticisms: Scott's definition of resistance is far too broad to be meaningful; he has imposed his class-based understanding where it may be inappropriate; he has only focused on the micro-economic perspective, failing to notice the positive effects of what Scott imagines is class oppression.

Scott defines infrapolitics as “the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril. ... All political action takes forms that are designed to obscure their intentions or to take cover behind an apparent meaning”³. In other words, infrapolitics is invisible resentment, the “hidden transcript”, the result of oppressive policies and harsh penalties for disobedience or open criticism.

If infrapolitics is the context, then primitive resistance may be defined as any circumspect action taken by members of an oppressed class with the intention of harming the interests of the oppressive class or advancing the interests of the individual member of the oppressed class. Scott sees this pragmatically covert and anonymous reaction against oppression as the necessary context from which any overt political or revolutionary movement may arise.

1 Scott, J., “Beyond the war of words: cautious resistance and calculated conformity” in Amoore, L. (ed) “The Global Resistance Reader”, Routledge, London and New York, 2005

2 Scott, J., “The infrapolitics of subordinate groups” in Amoore, L. (ed) “The Global Resistance Reader”, Routledge, London and New York, 2005

3 Ibid., pp. 71-72

Primitive resistance is different from 'regular' or 'real' resistance because it is "rarely collective" and "rarely open"⁴. He does not mean to imply that primitive resistance will and must grow into organised resistance, but calls it "the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow"⁵. One example he gives is poaching in eighteenth century England, commonplace although it was a capital crime, being a surreptitious way for peasants to assert their perceived property rights to previously common land and game, all without any visible protest. His in-depth case study is Sedaka village, in Malaysia.

Neo-Marxism exposed to fresh thinking

The first thing that appealed to me about primitive resistance was its originality. A good deal of the study of history and politics focuses on the privileged minority of leaders and their wars. Yet infrapolitics does not do this: it reminds us that oppressed masses throughout the ages were denied a political voice by authoritarian regimes and may have been overlooked by posterity⁶. Trying to find what has been politically concealed is, for a neo-Marxist, innovative and interesting. Whereas Marxists have in the past often unilaterally claimed to speak on behalf of the unrepresented, here Scott is exploring whether we can infer what the downtrodden think or thought for themselves.

Much of Marx's work on capital focused on the role of two urban classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Although some revolutionary leaders such as Che Guavara have indeed led the rural peasantry in armed struggle, not all Marxists gave as much attention to their revolutionary potential: for example, Lenin called peasants "ignorant and conservative"⁷. It is

4 Scott, J., "Beyond the war of words: cautious resistance and calculated conformity" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 393

5 Ibid., pp. 404

6 Scott, J., "The infrapolitics of subordinate groups" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, New York, 2005, pp. 70-71

7 Lenin, V., "Social-Democracy's Attitude Towards the Peasant Movement" in Lenin Collected Works, Progress Publishers, 1972, Moscow, Volume 9, pages 230-239

therefore a slight departure from classical Marxism that Scott has made: he has tried to show that peasants can and indeed do resist the landowner class, albeit in a limited way and without necessarily any awareness of socialist ideology. The concept of primitive resistance is an interesting product of the slight widening of a Marxist scope to include that which it had previously overlooked or dismissed.

Scott, rather than writing at a macro-economic level like classical Marxists, takes a very close individualistic study of his case. He even demonstrates his argument with anecdotes about individual actors; by demonstrating the reality of primitive resistance in practical terms, he might more easily convince the reader that primitive resistance is a proper term to account for the local conditions he describes. This style certainly makes interesting reading but it may be a contributory factor for Scott's failure to consider the wider macro-economic implications of agricultural progress in Sedaka and the peasants' resistance to it, as I will discuss later.

The little problem of evidence

Although infrapolitics is an intriguing concept, I do not feel Scott sufficiently demonstrates that widespread dissatisfaction and primitive resistance can have a significant effect in practice. Scott quotes Djilas as saying the "slow, unproductive work of disinterested millions... is the calculable, invisible, and gigantic waste which no communist regime has been able to avoid"^{8 9}. While it is refreshing to see a criticism of communism in practice from a neo-Marxist, Scott either does not believe or does not make it clear that primitive resistance was not the original cause of the failure of the communist system, but a predictable result of central economic planning in an environment where rational economic decisions were deliberately made

Accessed online at the Marxists Internet Archive on 08/12/08 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/sep/05e.htm>

8 Scott, J., "The infrapolitics of subordinate groups" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, New York, 2005, pp. 70

9 Djilas, M., "The New Class: An analysis of the Communist System", Praeger, New York 1983

impossible^{10 11}.

Even if we were to accept the idea of primitive resistance and wish to study it, its 'infra' nature makes this problematic (Scott acknowledges this)¹². There is no written statement of grievances and aims nor any declared groups; all the methods or actions of primitive resistance may either be explained away as forms of compliance or are anonymous. Finding genuine examples of primitive resistance to study may therefore be difficult. Distinguishing between cases where primitive or no resistance may be occurring is, I believe, a serious problem which stems from Scott's definition of resistance. I will address this subject later.

Even within Scott's study, some of his evidence is ambiguous. He suggests that theft may be motivated by class envy, although since "the 'transcript' of petty thieves, especially those not yet apprehended, is notoriously hard to come by"¹³ it is almost impossible to refute (or defend) this claim. Earlier, he writes that migration in Malaysia is "avoidance protest"^{14 15}, a statement which has similar problems. It is hard to accept that migration occurs to escape "surplus extraction", when in the next paragraph he shows that more profitable work can be had in different industries or urban centres.

Scott writes "the ability to raid the cash economy to make good the local subsistence deficit continues to provide a less risky alternative to local conflict"¹⁶. The implication of this is that,

10 Von Mises, L., "Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth"

Accessed online at the Ludwig Von Mises Institute at <http://mises.org/econcalc.asp>

11 Hayek, F., "The Road to Serfdom", Routledge, London and New York, 2007 (first published 1944)

12 Scott, J., "Beyond the war of words: cautious resistance and calculated conformity" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 405-406

13 Ibid., pp. 406

14 Adas, M., "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia" in Dirks, N. B. (ed) "Colonialism and Culture", University of Michigan Press, 1992

15 Scott, J., "Beyond the war of words: cautious resistance and calculated conformity" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 395

16 Ibid.

were only the conditions of the peasants a little worse then perhaps they would resist openly. However, it seems clear that where there are other options available for material advancement, the conditions which concern Scott's case study are made less relevant.

Trivial coping mechanisms

It is notable that Scott challenges the traditional attitude towards what does and does not constitute 'real' resistance. He may, true, distinguish 'primitive' from 'real' resistance, but he defines primitive resistance so broadly as to include any action practically indistinguishable from compliance. He writes "One might argue that even such practical resistance... amounts to nothing more than trivial coping mechanisms. ... At one level this is perfectly true but irrelevant since our point is that these are the forms that political struggle takes when frontal assaults are precluded by the realities of power."¹⁷ With such a broad definitional scope, however, and with the methods of primitive resistance so ambiguous and ubiquitous, it seems difficult to look at any part of any society without finding primitive resistance! With Scott's new definition of resistance, a mugging may be construed as resistance against inequitable property relations, an idle minute in the workplace becomes a silent cry against "the dull compulsion of economic relations"¹⁸ and even rumours invented by pupils against school-teachers may be construed as acts of resistance against coercive indoctrination. I suggest that resistance ceases to be a useful concept if we apply Scott's definition of the term.

Let us consider an alternative definition of resistance as commonly conceived: overt and public actions taken by a group with a stated political aim, unambiguously acting to damage or overthrow a political regime or practice. Using this definition (not meaning to imply it is not imperfect) the circumspect acquiescence that Scott documents cannot be considered

17 Scott, J., "The infrapolitics of subordinate groups" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 70

18 Marx, K., "Capital, Volume 1", Chapter 28, Accessed online at the Marxists Internet Archive on 08/12/08 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch28.htm>

resistance at all. In fact, from this point of view, Scott has merely created a confusion in his own or his reader's mind between 'resistance' and 'no resistance whatsoever'.

The greatest example of Scott's primitive resistance was an "inevitable" failure: the would-be boycotters never criticised or negotiated with the farmer who used a combine-harvester, they transplanted his field and even themselves broke a would-be strike in another village. Scott might respond that I have missed his point: that he is merely describing what does in fact exist wherever there is an oppressive potential for advanced resistance but no opportunity for political dissent. To which I would reply, if what Scott has described is the necessary but insufficient condition for advanced resistance, would it not be more accurate to say primitive resistance is a total failure to resist?

Drowning in class waters¹⁹

As Mittelman and Chin correctly point out²⁰, Scott never thinks to examine whether the power relations of class are reproduced, across classes, for gender. Scott does examine the role of women to some extent in Sedaka, but a feminist perspective would certainly have more to say on the role of women within the family structure and workforce. By focusing solely on class, Scott has overlooked this interesting social dimension.

For a moment, it almost seems as if Scott acknowledges some limits to analysing Sedaka village from the perspective of classes. Yet ultimately, he is unable to escape his simple framework. He admits that the classes in Sedaka are poorly defined and highly porous at best: he laments the "kinship, friendship, faction, patronage, and ritual ties that muddy the 'class

19 Scott, J., "Beyond the war of words: cautious resistance and calculated conformity" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 394

20 Mittelman, J. H. and Chin, C. B. N., "Conceptualizing resistance to globalization" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 23

waters"²¹ in Sedaka. Yet all these group identities describe what already exists in the village, whereas a more simplistic landowner/peasant class model is externally imposed (or at least brought into prominence) by Scott. The facts on the ground, as Scott reports them, are not well suited for the prominent place of class in his argument. It is not appropriate to frame an argument in terms of class conflict where the existing community networks are thoroughly interlinked and do not bear out the exploiter/exploited assumption.

Scott's attempt to ameliorate the narrow focus of Marxist study is only partially successful. Where he alleges there is such a thing as negative class solidarity, or that petty theft is evidence of "implicit forms of local trade unionism"²² it seems to me that he is trying to modify a Marxist concept retrospectively to fit into his case study. Perhaps the broadening of the definition of resistance to include primitive forms is unwittingly an attempt to excuse socialism's failure to infiltrate rural Malaysian society. Since primitive resistance does not rely on any action, ideology or visible class consciousness, it is too easy to conclude that there is a revolutionary socialist potential behind every rural community, if only it would recognise itself.

The curse of machinery?²³

Although I admit Scott never explicitly passes judgement on whether primitive resistance is a 'good' thing in Sedaka, I propose that it is implicit in his focus of study that the peasants' inability to resist beyond a primitive level is to be lamented. By inference from his sympathetic language and the problem areas he writes about, Scott wants more employment security, unionisation and better wages for unskilled subsistence farm-work, despite that it is less efficient than combine harvesting and, indeed, perpetuates a situation that requires a large

21 Scott, J., "Beyond the war of words: cautious resistance and calculated conformity" in Amoore, L. (ed) "The Global Resistance Reader", Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp. 394

22 Ibid., pp. 399

23 Hazlitt, H., "Economics in One Lesson", Chapter 7 "The Curse of Machinery", The Ludwig Von Mises Institute, Alabama, 2008 (first published 1946)

class of people wholly dependent on the land for income.

Though Scott would probably defend himself by claiming that he was just observing the peasants' struggle and not passing judgement, I cannot help but feel he should have done more than merely document primitive resistance, but also directly question whether the peasants are justified in their actions (or at least, whether we are justified in supporting them).

Scott has focused only on the micro-economic situation, and even then, only on the group he perceives as the dominated class. By limiting his analysis in this way, he has, perhaps, failed to grasp the beneficial long-term and broad consequences of agricultural mechanisation, the very thing that seems to threaten the peasants' livelihood.²⁴ It is almost comical that Scott uses the example of the industrial revolution in England: he absolutely fails to acknowledge the absurdity of the Luddites' position (the 'Luddite fallacy': the belief that greater productivity creates unemployment) because it is just this argument that he retreats. Indeed, there is more hope for the Malay poor than Scott has realised! The use of combine harvesters lowers the costs of living for countless peasants around the country and Third World, even those who were not fortunate enough to receive Scott's attention. Because fewer people are required to produce the same amount of food, more labour becomes available for more productive industries, such as oil or rubber extraction and - let us not forget - the manufacture of combine harvesters. This progress, just like Scott's infrapolitics, may not be apparent at first glance. These net gains cannot be achieved through resistance from the peasantry, primitive or otherwise, but only through free markets and private enterprise.

Conclusion

Initially, primitive resistance seemed like an original concept, despite that some of Scott's evidence is questionable. The more I have expanded on my criticisms of Scott's analysis of

²⁴ Ibid.

primitive resistance, the less appealing the idea has become. The definition of resistance that is required for the concept of primitive resistance is highly concerning, and I have argued that what Scott is describing is not any kind of resistance whatsoever, but the absence of resistance! His argument is phrased in the language of class conflict and I have shown my doubt that this Marxist framework is well suited for the case study. Finally, I have tried to demonstrate that Scott's attention was too closely focused on the short-term interests of those particular peasants and that he has overlooked that the process of industrialisation and mechanisation is beneficial, not harmful, to the poor people of Malaysia.

To restate, Scott has set such low standards for demonstrating evidence of resistance, and compromised classical Marxism to such an extent, that he finds it too easy to impose his interpretation of universal socialist resistance onto a society where it is truly not applicable.

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