“James Scott, C. Wright Mills, and the Problems of Positivism”

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—Abstract—

In 2001, the political anthropologist James Scott spoke at length about his unease with contemporary trends in the American political science. He believed abstraction and large-scale data gathering had rendered the discipline useless for everyday citizens. Scott’s critique calls to mind C. Wright Mills’ argument, made a half-century earlier, about the harms that grand theorizing and abstract empiricism pose to participatory democracy. Although both thinkers noted similar problems with current social-science approaches to political knowledge, Scott and Mills made different recommendations about the types of activities intellectuals should undertake. The differences in advice reflected (1) their different understandings of the historical context of modern social science and (2) their divergent assessments of the amount of non-elite activism in the United States today.

Early in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Richard Snyder and Gerardo Munck interviewed fifteen scholars within the subfield called “comparative politics” for a collection of conversations that would give readers “a precious, rare glimpse of the working methods of some of the best scholars in the field” and “a unique window on some of the greatest minds in the field of comparative politics over the past fifty years.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In selecting their sample of best scholars, Snyder and Munck did not mechanically count numbers of article citations, book awards, or other accolades. They apparently relied on their intuition about what constituted seminal discoveries and important topics. One of their choices was James C. Scott, whose most recent books – *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), and *Seeing Like a State* (1998) – had prompted lively debates not only among social scientists, but among humanists working in religious studies, American studies, and comparative literature.

The splash helps explains Snyder and Munck’s selection of Scott. Still, they had ignored many influential and groundbreaking scholars – including Benedict Anderson, Reinhard Bendix, Suzanne Berger, Ronald Inglehart, Chalmers Johnson, Ira Katznelson, Seymour Martin Lipset, Robert Putnam, Giovanni Sartori, Susan Stokes, Sidney Tarrow, and George Tsebelis. Why interview Scott and not one or more of these well-known thinkers? One cannot rule out political considerations. Scott had been elected the next president of the American Political Science Association, even though he had been an outspoken critic of both the governing procedures and the scholarly norms of political science. Perhaps Snyder and Munck believed that some readers would interpret Scott’s absence from their collection as evidence of the co-editors’ stodginess toward the subfield’s non-conformist minds. And, conversely, there might be readers who would view the inclusion of Scott as evidence of the volume’s generational breadth and intellectual inclusivity.

Whatever the editors’ calculation, a risk remained. What might one of the discipline’s most exuberant critics say during an interview about his career? As it turned out, a lot.

1. “Bad at Theory”

Scott explained early in the interview that the theses, concepts, or postulates of a groundbreaking generation of post-World War II political scientists – Gabriel Almond and Robert Dahl, among them – had not inspired his research. Scott’s declaration of distance from the widely acknowledged giants of the profession apparently puzzled Snyder. He wondered aloud: did Scott derive his notions and concerns from non-academic writers about politics, such as Italy’s famous Marxist organizer Antonio Gramsci or “anarchist theorists like Kropotkin”? In fact, “Do you consider yourself a theorist?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

For centuries, English speakers have used “theorist” (and its cognates “theory” and “theorizing”) in multiple ways. Sometimes the term has referred to playful conjecture and even fantasy that is unconnected to one’s actual behavior. For instance, “I’ve number played a musical instrument, but in theory I’m a great guitarist.” Some people, however, have used the term in reference to rigorous, practical contemplation that helps one weigh alternatives and make real-world choices. Allegedly, when human actions are guided by or infused with theory (a process sometimes called “praxis”), humans acquire personal and collective freedom.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Snyder seemed to use “theory” in a third way: to demarcate one side of an academic division of labor that became common in the United States at the onset of the Cold War. In many departments of political science, government, and politics, some professors began to wonder about how politics ought to be practiced in the future, whereas others focused on how politics are presently practiced.[[4]](#footnote-4) “Theory” (used in this strictly academic context) referred to an evaluative and prescriptive style of study, while “empiricism” (shorthand for “empirical science”) referred to a preoccupation with what exists. The crux of the difference involved the relative centrality of judgment in one’s research. “Theorists” explicitly stated and studied political values, principles, and goals. “Empiricists” sought to purge to judgments – that is, commitments, values, and hopes – from their research and to allow observable facts speak for themselves.

When asking Scott if he considered himself a “theorist,” Snyder apparently had the normative-versus-empirical dichotomy in mind.[[5]](#footnote-5) Scott seemed to focus on a different meaning. He answered that he “actually” considered himself “as bad at theory” and immediately added that this statement was not a ruse (“And I am not being coy or overly modest.”[[6]](#footnote-6)). Scott then elaborated that he had found “theory” difficult because it entailed “fourth-order abstraction”: “I actually *cannot*, I repeat *cannot*, think in terms of fourth-order abstractions [sic].”[[7]](#footnote-7) By the time the interview had ended, Scott said at least three times that he had an aversion to “fourth-order abstractions.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Scott, in effect, broke from Snyder’s script. Snyder wanted Scott to discuss his relationship to writers who openly advocated values and made judgments. Scott wished to talk about fourth-order abstraction. Moreover, as the interview proceeded, Scott intimated that many so-called “empirical” political scientists engaged in fourth-order abstraction. *They*, not he, were the theorists! By subverting Snyder’s categories, he had turned the interview topsy turvy.

1. Varieties of Politics and Abstraction

To grasp Scott’s meaning, it is necessary to step aside from the published interview. The prepared questions provided Scott with little opportunity to expand on the meaning of “fourth-order abstraction,” and clarification was needed. Standard reference works for social scientists do not list the term.[[9]](#footnote-9) Political scientists, who bandy about “social capital” and “post-materialism” at conferences, do not employ “fourth-order abstraction” in their daily shoptalk. Scott has not used the phrase in any of his major publications, aside from a closing comment in an anthropology journal that devoted a special issue to his work.[[10]](#footnote-10)

However, Scott has written repeatedly about “abstraction” both as a mode of perception and as a political phenomenon. And in several books, he has argued that ranges of perception shift in tandem with scales of rulership.[[11]](#footnote-11) These comments provide clues as to what he had in mind during the interview.

Vernacular Abstraction and Everyday Politics

Scott typically has used “abstraction” when discussing the ways people obtain reliable knowledge about the world, and the limits of that knowledge. The term stands at a terminus of an epistemological and psychological continuum involving attentiveness and focus. At one end lies the relaxed, flexible, almost playful way of observing one’s environment – say, the scanning the countryside during a morning walk. At the other end lies what Scott has called “abstraction,” in which one shuts down one’s peripheral vision and looks for and at specific details – for example, when inspecting a garden plant for insects.[[12]](#footnote-12)

While useful for disclosing patterns, abstraction is an imperfect method of learning about the world, according to Scott. The problem: abstraction never yields a wholistic understanding of the countless objects around us and their complex and constantly changing relationships. True, depending on whether one is hungry, thirsty, hot, or cold, different aspects of one’s immediate surroundings will come into focus. But even if one constructs a montage from successive discoveries, the composite picture will convey only a small percentage of all the entities and forces in the environment and their dynamic interactions.

One way that individuals compensate for their ignorance is through discussions with others in the immediate vicinity. Fellow members of a farmstead – because they have different domestic responsibilities and ages and, therefore, different short-term and long-term aims – will examine their common garden plot for different reasons and uncover different truths.[[13]](#footnote-13) The same holds true of residents in neighboring domiciles, hikers passing though a valley, or anglers along a river. Each person’s vision, while inevitably one-sided and patchy, can be added to the community’s pool of abstractions, leading to fuller, producing deeper knowledge of the entire group’s circumstances.

According to Scott, all social interactions thus have an educational function. The veillées (evening barn gatherings in nineteenth-century France) “amounted to local assemblies where opinions, stories, agricultural news, advice, gossip, and religious or folk tales were exchanged while the participants shelled nuts or embroidered. . . . the veillée was an unheralded daily seminar on practical knowledge.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Scott has cited the writings of Jane Jacobs to argue that similar poolings of personal knowledge occur in myriad urban settings: on townhouse stoops, sidewalk corners, park benches, and other urban settings. Both neighbors and passersby exchange discoveries and jointly ponder the practical possibilities that those observations suggest.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Scott has argued that these informal exchanges of partial views – regardless of whether they occur at oases, on the prairies, or in taverns – form the bases for an egalitarian, albeit informal, type of politics that most political scientists today fail to notice because of their narrow focus on formal government. Individuals, as they reach conclusions about the meaning of a situation, coin locally meaningful names, sayings, slogans, and stories They also craft norms – say, sharing scarce goods with neighbors in distress – and propose collective solutions – say, hunting parties and barn raisings – to the problems they have jointly uncovered.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Reminiscent of Tacitus’ political accounts of Germanic warriors circling a fire and discussing what to do next, Scott has described the face-to-face gatherings as generally infused with candor and ample opportunities to speak for or against a proposal. Borrowing from the vocabularies of both anarchists and American anthropologists, Scott also has used the term “mutuality” to convey both the egalitarian ethos and the sense of communal responsibility evident at these meetings. He, finally, has repeatedly intimated that most informal gatherings are, in a broad sense of the term, “republican” in constitutional spirit (with the right to speak aloud during the making of a group decision broadly distributed among people from different strata) and less frequently are constitutionally authoritarian (with the power to make binding decisions for a group concentrated in a few hands and with open disagreements with the ruling subgroup prohibited).[[17]](#footnote-17)

This tendency toward egalitarianism is, in Scott’s mind, easily explicable because until the late twentieth century, dissenters around the globe almost always had the de facto option of physically leaving their local groups and heading for new spaces, such as highlands, where systems of social rule seemed less tyrannical and despotic. For this reason, throughout most of humankind’s history, hamlets, neighborhoods, farmsteads, nomadic tribes, and other tiny rural social units have been

in almost constant motion: dissolving, splitting, relocating, merging, and reconstituting. . . . it was relatively simple for households and entire villages to move. Thus, over time, the membership of any elementary unit was in flux, as was the very existence of the unit itself.[[18]](#footnote-18)

State Abstraction and Court Politics

Scott has argued that around the third millennium BC, humankind’s highly mobile existence started to fade. Settlements with several thousands of residents began to appear on patches of alluvium. Within those settlements arose a more concentrated style of rule. Military strongmen and their entourages protected the sedentary farming communities in exchange for a monopoly on all decision-making regarding defense. The military class also bolstered monocrop farming to feed large numbers of non-farmers, including as soldiers, priests, courtiers, and artisans. In addition, the armed rulers constructed protective walls to keep invaders at bay and, no less important, to prevent current inhabitants (especially slaves, conscripts, and corvee laborers) from leaving.[[19]](#footnote-19)

All the while, the rulers in their castles relied on clerks to survey the realm, aggregate relevant information (such as annual grain yields, amounts of protective wall in need of repair, and the numbers of adults immediately available for corvee labor), take stock of military resources, and track transactions (tax payments, equine purchases, and so on). These court officials functioned as the eyes and ears of the ruler, who, after all, could not literally be present everywhere at once and oversee the diverse activities of thousands of subjects.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The clerks developed new trans-local vocabularies to help them assemble and aggregate information from different corners of the realm. Previously, local methods of counting, measuring, and labeling (say, nicknames conveying a person’s skills or traits) arose organically to handle the inhabitants’ immediate needs and concerns. So, new definitions of quantity – say, of arable land or distances from the castle – were invented. In Scott’s opinion, without the realm-wide numeric units there could not be tax rolls, population registers, cattle censuses, periodic crop estimates, requisition orders, and so forth. And without such written records, the rulers of even tiny city-states and fiefdoms could not estimate what needed to be done or could be done. The clerks, by abstracting on a trans-local scale and aggregating in light of the warriors’ needs, made the innumerable goings-on across a vast territory comprehensible (or, to borrow Scott’s vocabulary, “legible”) to its military rulers. In Scott’s opinion, the trans-local scale of abstraction was tectonic in its political implications (“It is no exaggeration to claim that conquest of illegibility is the most momentous achievement of the modern state.”).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Two types and levels of abstraction thus developed side by side. First, there were the vernacular abstractions that emerged during inhabitants’ direct encounters with the world and that were the subjects of informal discussions and communal decisions. Then, there were the spatially larger scale and numerically expressed abstractions to be used by settlement’s warrior class. The walled settlement’s – or state’s – abstractions were unrelated to locals’ daily purposes and ignored many details important to the settlement’s residents. In Scott’s words: the aim of the new vocabulary “was to eliminate a host of local, vernacular, and idiosyncratic practices of measurement so that, for the first time, the ruler at the center could have clear view of the wealth, production, and manpower resources at his disposal.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

According to Scott, the two types of abstraction – the official language of the settlements’ ruling class and vernacular communication of the commoners – were part and parcel of two divergent styles of politics: the hierarchical politics of the high court (in which decision-making rights were concentrated in the hands of a small number of personages) and the informal politics of village streets and outlying fields (in which decision-making process were informal and decentralized, and rights to comment were diffused among a variety of interested parties). The participants in the two very different types of political practice not only brought different interests to their discussions about public circumstances. They literally observed and experienced their geographic environments differently and reached divergent conclusions about policies related to defense (especially rules concerning taxation and corvee labor).

Bristling over novel taxation, conscription, and corvee laws, many residents either fled their settlements or covertly resisted the warlords through such evasive actions as misreporting harvests, cultivating secret gardens, and giving false information about the numbers of able-bodied adults residing within a domicile.[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus, the ongoing tug of war over policy between the warrior court and the inhabitants overlapped with a cultural tug of war over rival ways of comprehending the world. Rulers tried to secure obedience through coercion and fear, of course. However, primitive technology, challenges of weather and uneven terrain, and a limited tax base greatly hampered the military rulers’ ability to police large swaths of land and endlessly punish large numbers of residents. So, the commanders tried to induce compliance less forcefully: through showy rituals, endorsements by divines, and exaggerated stories about the innumerable benefits provided by the martial regime (and, conversely, the chaos that would commence should the rulers’ material resources dry up).[[24]](#footnote-24) Rulers also tried to discredit internal rebels and those former subjects who fled the territory by labeling them outlaws, barbarians, and kin to wildlife.[[25]](#footnote-25) Naturally, subjects viewed the situation very differently, leading to a perpetual populist undertow and a contrary moral vision, including dreams of life without a ruling class.[[26]](#footnote-26)

High-Modern Abstraction and Grand Politics

According to Scott, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the politics of abstraction underwent a second metamorphosis. A confluence of historical developments, which scholars often summarized under the labels the Industrial Revolution, and the Great Capitalist Transformation, and the Enlightenment, gave states an unprecedented jump in their supervisory capacity and material resources and transformed rulers’ ambitions. Distance-demolishing technology, such as bridges, all weather roads, trucks, and radios, allowed power holders in capital cities to surveil the goings-on of more people than ever.[[27]](#footnote-27) Meanwhile, modern industrial firms transformed vast amounts of raw materials into mass-produced goods for anonymous consumers and distant markets.

Both political elites and captains of industry desired standardized, quantitative units of measurement that could be applied across vast spaces. They, also, gravitated toward and because proselytizers of a new creed that Scott has called “high modernism.” It revolved around the notion that existing societies could be significantly improved if they were recast according to universally valid laws of nature. High modernism, in the words of Scott,

is best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. It originated, of course, in the West, as a by-produce of unprecedented progress in science and industry.[[28]](#footnote-28)

An implication was that the geographical broad, non-vernacular style of abstraction developed by previous generations of castle record-keepers now could be treated as an Archimedean point for transforming society.[[29]](#footnote-29)

State leaders, Scott has contended, no longer were content with protecting the borders or even increasing their country’s wealth and material power. They wanted to enhance subjects’ lives so that they feel safer, satisfied, and more content. A side benefit: they would work harder and serve more loyally. So, rulers ambitiously attempted to reshape the social and physical contours of their realms through five-years plans, model cities, agrarian development plans, transportation systems, and so forth. By the late-twentieth century, “industrial strength social engineering” and “slide-rule authoritarianism” (Scott’s terms) had become commonplace across the globe. [[30]](#footnote-30)

The fly in the humanitarian ointment was the planners’ failure to see situations from residents’ points of view. The microfeatures of a single farmer’s field (soil depth, drainage patterns, the stoniness of areas, temperature volatility) made predictions about the long-term consequences of large-scaled agrarian reform difficult. Ignorance grows exponentially as the number of localities multiplies: “like a forest, a human community is surely far too complicated and variable to easily yield its secrets to bureaucratic formulae.” “As for wars, oil embargoes, weather, consumer tastes, and political eruptions, our capacity for prediction is practically nil.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Unfortunately, government officials, relying solely on a bird’s eye view of reality, have been blind to the multitude of secondary and tertiary ripple effects flowing from a single well-intended action. What were seemingly minor and easily dismissed matters snowballed often into tragedies. Grand projects, launched for arguably noble reasons, often backfired, leading to unanticipated forms of suffering. Among the illustrations Scott has examined are the Soviet Union’s agricultural collectives, China’s Great Leap Forward, Brazil’s experimental capital city (Brasilia), Tanzania’s villagization campaign, US slum clearance projects, and Canada’s civilization campaign for the Inuit.

According to Scott, better policies would have resulted from an integration of experts’ specialized views with the evolving practical knowledge of local folks. However, professional pride has prevented data collectors from listening to the opinions of non-experts. Rather than allowing everyday people to air their objections toward radical projects, the high-modernist alliances of nation-state governors, captains of industry, and policy experts have chosen to keep common people more than an arm’s length from decision-making chambers. When questioned public, modern policy makers behaved defensively and disparaged the judgment of those not fluent in quantitative data, inept at trans-local generalization, and illiterate with regard technical vocabulary. Ironically, their attitude of superiority betrayed the true spirit of science that, according to Scott, is deeply open-minded, worried about premature conclusions, and insists on tests, tests, and more tests about *any* claim. [[32]](#footnote-32) Their attitude was also anti-political in the classic sense of allowing competing views and judgements to be aired and then finding common cause.[[33]](#footnote-33)

When measured against promised results, high-modernist hubris has yielded failure after failure. Yet, Scott does not end his narratives on a negative note. In his tales, disaster usually is mitigated (though not completely avoided) once government officials, acknowledging the magnitude of the unanticipated problems, have allowed locals to use their piecemeal vernacular knowledge to mitigate the situation through a mixture of unauthorized micro-projects and sub rosa resistance.[[34]](#footnote-34) Such struggles continue today, according to Scott, because “[F]orms of informal cooperation, coordination, and action that embody mutuality without hierarchy are the quotidian experience of most people.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Therefore, “Given sufficient time and leeway, of course, any high-modernist plan will be utterly remade by popular practices.”[[36]](#footnote-36) The outcome, in Scott’s opinion, is neither deadlock nor chaos, but temporary reconciliations between the bold, utopian initiatives from above and cautious, ecologically informed responses from below.[[37]](#footnote-37)

1. Positivism as a Social Movement

Before we connect Scott’s macro-historical narrative about evolving traditions of abstraction to his statement about being “bad at theory,” let us take a second detour and recall a short-lived social movement in Europe whose reform program affected the upper echelon of American political science when Scott was beginning his graduate studies.[[38]](#footnote-38)

During the second decade of the twentieth century, a few dozen local scholars, students, and public servants in Vienna began to organize seminars and symposia on the nature of science. The meetings attracted visitors across the globe, including A. J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Karl Popper. The participants came to call themselves the Vienna Circle.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Although the members discussed such arguably dry topics as the logic of induction and the possibility of verification, it was not simply a group of bookworms. Members were worried about the direction of their country which, after its defeat World War I, had been reduced to an overwhelmingly rural, medium-sized, land-locked nation-state. Reparation burdens, runaway inflation, and Great Depression had led to widespread hunger and ongoing fuel shortages. By the early 1930s, over a third of the population was unemployed.[[40]](#footnote-40) Conservative political parties and demagogues attributed the country’s downfall to different international nemeses (England and France, Jews, Communists, atheists). Paramilitary groups, affiliated with rival partisan groups, duked it out on weekends and tried to disrupt public lectures by suspicious-sounding speakers. One province abutting Austria’s westernmost frontier held a non-binding referendum on the question of whether to join Switzerland and leave what right-wing propagandists called “the Jewish state of Vienna.” More than 80 percent of those who voted casted their ballots for separation.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Despite the tumultuous political climate, Vienna remained a cultural magnet thanks to its well-known university and a bevy of museums, concert halls, salons, and galleries supported by the city’s old wealth. Artists, scholars, college students, and public-sector employees met in pubs, coffee houses, homes, and empty classrooms to investigate a cutting-edge topic or theme – say, psychoanalysis or theorems of relativity. Some meetings were small and intimate. More formally organized clubs, such as the Vienna Circle, invited internationally renowned speakers.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Most participants in the Circle considered Austria’s current political troubles to be caused by prescientific modes of thought: reactionary religious beliefs, aristocratic codes of honor, and nationalist doctrines of racial purity. Wishing to escape irrational belief systems, the members explored possible alternative intellectual frameworks, such as the mathematical formulas used in physics. The strictly secular and logical rigorous modes of reasoning had yielded stunning technological breakthroughs over the past half century: self-powered flying machines, submarines, and an instrument that could photograph the insides of a living body. Perhaps if a scientific outlook took root in Austria, then the nationalist ideologies, anti-Semitic doctrines, and anti-constitutional propagandists would cease to attract followers. Conversely, modern liberal values – free speech, free thought, republican principles, and humanitarianism – might thrive.

The members of the Circle conceived of science in what, following contemporary fashions, they often called a “positivist” sense. This entailed the articulation of a logically compatible body of claims that seemed universally valid. In principle, one could understand and anticipate countless visible events and occurrences through logical deductions from self-evident and concise statements (so-called “principles,” “theorems,” and “laws”). Earthly experiments would test the predictive accuracy of the logically air-tight edifice. Should the empirical findings match a logically deduced expectation, then one could embrace the constellation of ideas with confidence. A mismatch would make it incumbent on scholars to identify the logical misstep. (Whether one or more mismatches could justify the rejection of an assumption was hotly debated within the Circle and led to divisions over rival methods of “verifiability” and “falsification,” and ultimately contributed to the group’s demise.[[43]](#footnote-43))

In 1929, a subset of participants composed a manifesto. *The Scientific Worldview* to clarify the group’s collective goals. The manifesto pledged the group to the development of a single, inclusive approach to knowledge that could be applied to all natural phenomena and social topics (from earthworm behavior to education policy). The manifesto also declared that so-called “metaphysical” questions, such as the origins of sinfulness, God’s plan, and races’ historic functions, were meaningless, except for the passions they fueled. Such slippery, non-empirical statements could not be answered by appeals to experience, yet they had provoked wars and propped up reactionary regimes. Best if such notions were set aside.

Although *The Scientific Worldview* captured the optimism and conveyed the proselytizing spirit of the Vienna Circle, it also divided the assemblage. Some members found the denouncements of metaphysical thinking too extreme and wished henceforth to be listed publicly only as “associates,” and not full members.[[44]](#footnote-44) Other members, such as former Communist-party activist Otto Neurath, wanted the Circle to dedicate itself to a more revolutionary social agenda.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Despite the spats over the manifesto, an admiration for a mathematical version of science drew the participants together. The logical moves, deductive creativity, and imaginative breakthroughs of Albert Einstein, Ernst Mach, Russell, and Wittgenstein enthralled even the up-and-coming artists within the Circle, such as the novelist Robert Musil and the future screenplay writer Leo Perutz. The group launched a book series, *Writings for a Scientific Worldview*, and co-founded the Ernst Mach Society, which published technical papers and organized international conferences. Several members either designed or taught evening education courses for adults in which students discussed modern scientific theories and their contributions technology, architecture, furniture, and the arts (subjects ignored at the intellectually conservative University of Vienna).

The group’s more politically active members, such as Neurath, attempted to create a new type of Bentham-like political party that would promote greater reliance on arithmetic calculations of net happiness in the formulation of government policy. Neurath and his allies also tried to launch a new international language – that relied primarily on simple pictures and drawings – to replace the inexact and often emotional vocabulary currently used in election hustings and by bureaucrats of all stripes. In theory, the artificial language, because it lacked the moral innuendoes and scurrilous connotations characteristic of standard political talk, would encourage a more noble, responsible, and measured style of rule.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The Circle ultimately could not escape the rising tide of anti-Semitism within their country. In 1938, Nazi Germany grew impatient and invaded and occupied Austria. Throughout the 1930s, members of the group sought safe havens abroad, including Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton, Harvard, and Stanford universities. They also reunited with fellow emigres from Austria and Germany, such as Karl Popper, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Kelsen – all of whom had periodically attended meetings of the Circle and shared many of the Circle’s assumptions about the deductive and integrative nature of science and about science’s contributions to humanity’s liberal development. Former members of the Circle also found in the United States sympathetic audiences and eager acolytes, such Carl Hempel, Thomas Kuhn, John von Neumann, C.L. Stevenson, and Alfred Tarski.

Thanks to these personal networks, the members of the Circle disseminated their vision throughout America. It became the seedbed for new schools of social-scientific thought, including game theory (in economics) and legal positivism (in jurisprudence). Close followers of the Vienna Circle, such as Lazarsfeld, Hempel, and Kenneth Arrow) exposed an emerging generation of U.S. scholars, including Gabriel Almond, Robert Dahl, Robert Lane, and James N. Rosenau, to the positivists’ outlook. These younger scholars eagerly embraced the project of liberating humankind through science – that is, through logically tight webs of propositions whose meaning was unequivocal; through the development of logically consistent trains of theorems with broad applicability; through empirical assessments of the soundness of one’s overarching vision; and through the casting of aspersions on moral claims about politics that could not be empirically tested. By inventing novel political concepts (such as “polyarchy” and “political modernization”) and deriving, via logical deduction, testable hypotheses about regularities across time and space, the Young Turks hoped to revolutionize the academic study of politics.[[47]](#footnote-47)

One hotbed for the so-called positivist revolution in political science was Yale University, where Scott earned his doctorate. According to Scott,

Professors who themselves wouldn’t have known a Chi Squared from a Person’s R were teaching statistical methods like was the true gospel. . . . It was like going to a Jesuit school. This was great in the sense that the faculty members seemed to have a sense of purpose: they felt they were going to revolutionize political science. But, like me, most of my graduate student cohort was pretty skeptical [[48]](#footnote-48)

Almond was one of the faculty revolutionaries. His recently co-authored *The Politics of Developing Areas* had attempted to classify recurrent political patterns across economically underdeveloped regions of the globe and to explain the patterns through recently invented terms, like “structural functionalism.” Scott reported that Almond treated his new publication

like it was the biblical book of Genesis. Almond was using all these terms that I did not understand. I had had a very traditional training at Williams, so I did not know anything about the behavioral revolution. This was all a complete revelation to me. I made a list on 3 by 5 index cards of all the words I didn’t know, and I was naïve enough that when I had accumulated six or seven of these words, I raised my hand and said, “Professor Almond, I I don’t understand these words. Could you please explain to me what they mean?” . . . This was all new stuff to me. For example, I’d never heard of Karl Popper. I was starting at zero.[[49]](#footnote-49)

1. Scott’s Battle Against Positivism

Scott’s claims about being bad at theory and awkward at fourth-order abstraction become more understandable when we recall his macro-historical narratives about humanity as well as his experiences in graduate school. When talking about “theory,” Scott seems to have had in mind not so-called normative theory, but positivist theory and its preoccupation with uncovering general laws applicable across time and space. When discussing “fourth-order abstraction,” he seems to have meant the high-modernist ambition of making broad generalizations about politics and society without reference to the thinking and activities of ordinary people. Hence, Scott’s preferred approach when dealing with a social-scientific abstraction:

I have always found that I can work out abstractions like class, ideology, property, and resistance by watching them work themselves out in a concrete situation. Then, it’s possible for me to go back to the abstractions and write carefully about them.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Abstractions that are disconnected from identifiable people and their activities in the world are another matter: “that’s a style of thought that I am not very good at.”[[51]](#footnote-51) “Once you get three or four of them [fourth-order abstractions] dancing around I may sound smart enough, but I really don’t know what I’m talking about.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

If this account of Scott’s use of “theory” and “fourth-order abstraction” holds water, then why did Scott stress these topics when Snyder was trying to guide the interview in a different direction? The answer involves Scott’s displeasure with positivist political science, which he made no effort to hide: “. . . I don’t give a shit where political science is headed. They can wallow in whatever mire they want, and I continue to do my stuff.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

He, first of all, found most positivist-inspired research psychologically shallow. Rather than taking time to explore how people actually saw the world, researchers often presumed that people resembled either programable machines that responded in predictable ways to external stimuli (say, profit maximization), or non-rational beasts driven by a fixed set of internal appetites and instincts (say, hunger or frustration). We know from other writings that Scott has been outraged by the arrogance underlying the scholarly assumption that non-elites are not reflective beings has enraged Scott. “What is inadmissible, both morally and scientifically, is the hubris that pretends to understand the behavior of human agents without for a moment listening systematically to how they understand what they are doing and how they explain themselves.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Scott has argued the contrary position: that all people are capable of self-reflection, deliberation, and choice.[[55]](#footnote-55) Because humans independently reflect on their situations and constantly adjust and adapt as resources and environmental conditions change, human conduct can never be predetermined or predicted. He told Snyder, “Once you tell people what you have found out about their behavior they are free to change it and just piss in the soup.”[[56]](#footnote-56) This makes the study of society profoundly different from the study of nature. Survey research, “which was in its heyday when I was in graduate school,” can illuminate a past moment, but it cannot yield generalizable information upon which to make predictions. “You might discover that people prefer X or Y, or that they believe the Supreme Court if doing a good job. But these are not stable opinions; they can change next week under slightly different circumstances.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

According to Scott, because human reflection is so complex and dynamic, it cannot be modelled. One of the discipline’s newest iterations of positivist reasoning – rational-choice theory – mistakenly assumes that all humans make decisions as a proverbial shopkeeper would.

“My reply to that is, ‘Bull shit!’ Even when they make ordinary decisions, people are still in the grasp of dreams, myths, and values whose origins are poorly understood.” Advertisements, for example, suggest that a product can help one obtain additional goals that a consumer may desire, such as youthful energy or enhanced status. “This is even true for soap. You would think people buy soap because it gets them clean. Well, all soaps get you clean, but you choose a particular soap in the store because something about the packaging catches your eye. It has nothing to do with a rational decision.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Political scientists, because they downplay psychological complexity and ignore the richness of the human mind, underestimate the extent of human agency and the amount of contingency in human affairs. Consequently, they produce research of minimal value to everyday citizens. Allegedly,

. . . if you’re a political science today, especially a formal, deductive kind of political scientist, you have a little tool kit of universal wrenches. They parachute you into Patagonia or Nepal, and you open your tool kit and put your wrenches to work.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Preoccupied with developing broadly applicable laws and deaf to locals’ concerns and views, scholars primarily write to sharpen their deductive logic and professional terminology, “which is not, I think, why we’re here.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Scott called this orientation to the opinions of a few scholars “hyper-professionalism”:

According to my colleague Douglas Rae, someone actually did a study of the average number of reads of a social science journal article, and it turns out to be less than three. Let’s imagine they were off by a factor three, and the average number of readers is really nine. This still means that the whole business of peer-reviewed journals has no effect on the external world and is just a Rub Goldberg machine designed to get people tenure.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Scott was humble enough to admit that early in his career he, too, wrote for “a small, tiny telephone booth” of political scientists who wanted him to illustrate a broad generalization of two through their application to a concrete situation. Even scholars working in other disciplines found his work not worth reading, and his first book “was torn apart by people who knew a lot about Malaysia and Malaysian history. They thought it was pretty shallow, and I think they were right, actually.”[[62]](#footnote-62) So, he decided to follow disciplinary cues no longer and to emulate the close-range descriptive style of anthropologists and focus on the vernacular language, immediate concerns, and day-to-day choices of the local populations he studied.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Although Scott reported that he had turned his back on high-modernist forms of abstraction early in his career, he believed that American political science remained stuck in its positivist ways. He told Snyder that subsets of positivists (the most recent being rational-choice theorists) have controlled the profession’s major journals, conferences, and governing bodies. Many were loath to allow alternative styles of reasoning gain more than a toehold within the discipline.[[64]](#footnote-64) He therefore favored renaming *The American Political Science Review* (the profession’s best-known journal) *The Review of Positive Political Science*, as the name would better convey the editors’ unstated theoretical bias.[[65]](#footnote-65) Scott also decried the positivists’ aggrandizing approach to the hiring and promotion of faculty: “[w]hat I object to is the universalistic, Leninist tendencies of some people who do rational choice.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

Scott conveyed to Snyder his uncertainty about how best to respond to the various problems posed by positivism. Part of him simply wished to detach himself from his discipline and work primarily with anthropologists, historians, environmental scientists, and geographers. Why do more? Surely, he reasoned, the positivist revolution would die sooner or later.

My hunch, and this is just a hunch because I don’t believe in predictive science, is that rational choice will lay down a sediment layer, a layer of clay, that will mark its passing in the landscape. A lot of people will do it, and they will grow old together and eventually be superseded by new things.[[67]](#footnote-67)

In the meantime, he could tend to his intellectual garden privately: “if what I am working on coincides with what other people are interest in, that’s fine, I’m flattered. But if not, too bad, because that’s where I’m headed.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

But Scott also sometimes offered advice during the interview to readers opposed to positivism. First, he urged colleagues to take seriously the notion that humans are thinking and willing beings and are not helplessly pushed and pulled by economic laws, bodily needs, and cultural norms. If political scientists look at politics the way anthropologists do – in a theoretically naïve and therefore “honest” (Scott’s word[[69]](#footnote-69)) manner, they may discover novel initiatives and patterns of struggle that would be of interest to nonprofessionals. This, according to Scott, is what happened with the book of which he is most proud, *Weapons of the Weak*, that, to his happy surprise, was read and discussed by activists in Malaysia.[[70]](#footnote-70)

In addition, Scott advised political scientists to spend at least one third of their reading time on novels, poetry, plays, and non-political science scholarship. The works of, say, Nikolai Gogol, George Eliot, Bertolt Brecht, George Orwell, and Karl Polanyi can expose a scholar to vocabularies, categories, circumstances, calculations, motivations, and plot lines that are uncommon in positivist political science. This will enhance the nimbleness and reach of a researcher’s mind.

. . . if you’re just reading political science and only talking with political scientists, it’s like having a diet with only one food group. If that’s all you do, then you’re not going to produce anything new or original. You’re just going to reproduce the mainstream.[[71]](#footnote-71)

The flip side: scholars should avoid writing dryly and impersonally, as if composing laboratory reports. According to Scott, vignettes, parables, and metaphors can be equally, if not more, effective in conveying one’s findings and conclusions. In addition, a lively literary style reminds the reader that social reality is populated by self-directing and unpredictable human beings, not by a fixed number of immutable forces, laws, and principles. The notion of agency is reinforced.[[72]](#footnote-72)

At the same time, Scott told Snyder that political scientists should retain two aesthetic principles characteristic of the positivist approach to science: clarity and consistency in the use of explanatory concepts and descriptive terms, and respect for basic rules of formal logic. Conceptual clarity and logical rigor serve as dams against slipshod thinking. While art can feelings and alter perspectives, positivist science has its own strengths that should not be forgotten.[[73]](#footnote-73)

1. Age of Bureaucratic Machines

Several of Scott’s criticisms of twentieth-century positivism and fourth-order abstraction had been made half century earlier by another academic maverick, C. Wright Mills. The two authors diverged, however, on the topic of human resistance. Scott saw everyday evasion and opposition throughout history. Mills believed that bureaucracies and their ethos had rendered humans confused and faint-hearted. Therefore, passivity and withdrawal were becoming more commonplace.

Mills saw European and North American history in terms of four epochs, each with its own distinctive idealized visions of political order and human freedom. During antiquity, thousands of male inhabitants in numerous walled communities, such as Athens, Jerusalem, and Rome, assembled outside their homes, talked publicly about shared problems, and through open debates decided what to do. The ideal of the citizen thus was invented.

During the Dark Age (which Mills sometimes calls the Epoch of Orientalism) a division of political labor developed. Residents of villages and hamlets deferred to skilled warriors and their entourages, who offered a protection service in exchange for corvee service and the provision of goods. Commoners spoke about private troubles – hunger, illnesses, water shortages – within small face-to-face circles, while religious and warrior leaders met separately to make policies affecting the entire fiefdom and kingdom. A clear distinction between rulers and ruled prevailed, and the ideals of the benevolent patron and loyal servant partially eclipsed the older ideal of citizenship. Mills maintained that although newer forms of political authority were hierarchical, subjects understood exactly who in the immediate environs was powerful and through what arrangements and mechanisms power was exercised. As a result, commoners understood well who to target and how to resist should rulers become tyrannical, or the top-down system of extraction become arbitrary.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Mills argued that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – what he called the Modern Age – capitalism had become the primary form of production and distribution in Europe and its North American colonies. Property-owning artisans, yeoman farmers, merchants, and shopkeepers attempted to overthrow previous medieval hierarchies and to rule towns and rural communities by themselves. Printing presses, Protestant creeds, written constitutions, nuclear families, and other inventions and practices of the Modern Age encouraged novel notions about the moral and legal equality of all persons and about the possibility of being talented in multiple fields of endeavor (the so-called “Renaissance Man” ideal). It became more commonplace to believe that all humans – not only members of the nobility – had the ability and right to forge their own destinies.

Finally, artisans, family farmers, shopkeepers, and other social arrangements courses of action advanced and hindered personal goals. Many began to see private troubles – food shortages, intra-familial oppression, declining health – not merely as local matters but as having spatially large-scale ramifications that only trans-local collective actions could address. were solvable only through larger scale collective actions. Modern political ideals of democratic constitutions and representative institutions naturally evolved out of the initially local meetings of ambitious self-advancing individuals.[[75]](#footnote-75)

According to Mills, during the last half of the nineteenth century, a new way of life, which he labelled “Postmodernism,” began to supplant the democratic experiments and Renaissance ideal of the Modern Age. The individual entrepreneur was replaced by the bureaucratic professional. Factories, owned by multiple-plant industrial firms, churned out mass-produced goods that were to be sold to large numbers of anonymous buyers in distant markets. Bureaucracies solved the seemingly insurmountable coordination problems of the economy by dividing organizational goals into smaller tasks, each of which could be managed by white-collar workers toiling in separate offices. Each office was given the authority to make only a finite set of decisions according to standardized formulas and procedures. Pyramids of bureaus, each obeying written rules, managed the spatially far-flung economic system.[[76]](#footnote-76)

As policy making power became more impersonal and compartmentalized, members of society founded it harder to identify who was in charge.[[77]](#footnote-77) Mills called those sitting atop the bureaucratic hierarchies “the power elite,” but he admitted his phrase was tongue-in-cheek. The nominal leaders of gigantic bureaucracies lacked both the chivalric values of Medieval warriors and the cultural breadth of the personages of the Modern Epoch (for instance, the framers of the U.S. Constitution). The post-modern bureaucratic commanders were intellectual small fries who relied on ghost writers for their communication and on one-page memos to acquire a superficial understanding of their organizations’ activities. For public consumption, they mouthed canned justifications for their organizations’ practices; privately, they childishly followed the advice of minions. These “crackpot realists,” to use Mills’ vocabulary, could not effectively answer basic questions about the origins and purposes of their bureaus’ controversial policies and resorted to “kindergarten chatter” during uncomfortable interrogations. As Mills put it: “Public relations displace reasoned argument; manipulation and undebated decisions of power replace democratic authority. . . . In America today, men of affairs are not so much dogmatic as they are mindless.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

Because their lives were in fact shaped by unknown administrators, faceless offices, and faraway headquarters, ordinary people during the Fourth Epoch have come to feel profoundly vulnerable and helpless. As Mills put it,

Never before have so few men made such fateful decisions for so any people who themselves are so helpless. . . . On every hand, the individual is confronted with seemingly remote organizations and he feels dwarfed and helpless . . . More and more people are becoming dependent salaried workers who spend most alert hours of their lives being told what to do.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The growing numbers of regulations at work and play, in homes and public buildings, within schools and churches have coincided with decreasing opportunities for everyday people exercise their initiative and transform their environments. As a result, the Modernist vision of democratic rule (in which every property owner had ample opportunities to participate in local discussions and the determinations of public affairs) seems inadequate “even as an approximate model of how this society works.”[[80]](#footnote-80) The irony: in previous times, people may have been materially poorer, but at least they recognized the faces of rulers, their methods of rule, and their legitimizing myths, and therefore could, from time to time, individually and collectively resist their oppressors.[[81]](#footnote-81) Today, people may feel helpless, but they can neither identify who is in control nor determine how to resist. Feeling impotent within the bureaucratic landscape, individuals today are tempted to withdraw from public affairs and seek succor in mindless hobbies and private entertainment. The ideal of the Cheerful Robot has displaced the Modern Epoch’s ideals of a bold, self-directing entrepreneur and a daring, multi-talented Renaissance person.[[82]](#footnote-82)

In Mills’ opinion, the bureaucratically rich soil of the Post-modern period has generated distinctive intellectual habits, many of which Scott, years later, would associate with the positivist revolution in political science. According to Mills, since World War II institutions of higher education have taught students majoring in the social sciences to become arithmetically sophisticated technicians who, upon graduation, are hired by bureaus within both the public and the private sectors of the economy. Modern universities, at best, have superficially exposed social-science majors to the values of the so-called “liberal intellectual,” who playfully and open-mindedly contemplates the world from a variety of perspectives. Social scientists, instead, are trained to describe the world rotely: to plug information into standardized numeric categories; to apply well-established formulas; and to report correlations that would be of interest to organizational superiors. Today, institutions of higher education teach budding social scientists how to serve at their bureaucracies’ pleasure and how to present findings that advance whatever tasks their organizational unit assumes. Universities do not foster a critical attitude toward the status quo but, first and foremost, help graduates obtain reasonably well-compensated white-collar jobs.[[83]](#footnote-83) After that, workplace routines reinforce the trepid intellectual habits learned in college and plant more deeply the character traits of a “scared employee.”[[84]](#footnote-84)

Meanwhile, the mega-universities have bestowed honors and pay increases to faculty members according to their success in attracting outside funds, enhancing institutional status, and increasing numbers of student applications. Faculty members, wishing to participate in the post-war economic boom, have played the game, which includes masking economic inequities and deflecting attention from social injustices. They become reluctant to denounce falsehoods perpetrated in the mass media moguls, by nameless corporate bureaucrats, and faceless government officials upon whose good will the well-being of the university might depend and upon whose decisions external funds might flow. Even renowned academics pretentiously drape their silence with the virtuous clothing of scholarly objectivity, caution, and patience.[[85]](#footnote-85)

. . . the deepest problem of freedom for [college] teachers is not the occasional ousting of a professor, but a vague general fear—sometimes politely known as “discretion,” “good, taste,” or “balanced judgment.” It is a fear which leads to self-intimidation and finally becomes so habitual that the scholar is unaware of it. The real restraints are not so much external prohibitions as control of the insurgent by the agreements of academic gentlemen.[[86]](#footnote-86)

In Mills’ opinion, proverbial “hot beds” of critical thought American research universities are not.

Mills maintained that the handful of academics who criticize particular social conditions do so in occupationally safe, vague ways. Their calls for reform are, politically speaking, non-threatening because their proposed solutions presume the power elite’s good will and seldom cast aspersions on the competence and values of mid-level administrators. Furthermore, scholarly reformers avoid honest investigations of sources of opposition, practical trade-offs, and conflicts of interest. They presume social harmony and the benefits of current concentrations of power. They are de facto power conservatives.[[87]](#footnote-87)

But, again, most post-modern academics (in Mills’ eyes) are not even reformers. Most social scientists (especially eminent scholars) whittle away their time reflecting on “grand theory,” which Mills defined as the ceaseless logical association and dissociation of hypothetical concepts.[[88]](#footnote-88) Like Scott’s revolutionary positivists, Mills’ grand theorists intentionally ignored the vocabulary, ideas, and activities of everyday people. And like Scott’s high-modernist functionaries, Mills’ grand theorists presume that grassroots involvement in policy making is unnecessary and often obstacles to achieving the common good. Grand theorists therefore often find social conflict, popular resistance, and open disputation anathema.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Mills advised those social scientists who were committed to older Modern Epoch notions of personal and collective freedom to reject both amoral empiricism and elitist grand theory. Mills, instead, exhorted democratically committed social scientists to write about the overt and subtle violence that bolster large organizations and to challenge the rosy representations of a bureaucratically run society that grand theorists, the mass media, and other apologists for post-modernism hawked. Translated into Nietzsche’s categories of historiography: Mills called for critical histories of postmodern societies.[[90]](#footnote-90)

In addition, Mills urged social scientists to engage in what he called “structural” analyses. They should, in his opinion, gather and present observations that show how problems that a person might experience as a strictly private trouble – say, classroom shortages at a local school, an unexpected jump in one’s rent, or dirty water suddenly flowing from one’s faucets – have roots outside a person’s immediate situation. In Mills’ opinion, if scholars would disseminate ecological understandings of the broader social patterns and institutions that contribute to one’s troubles (for example, how corporate mergers led to a plant closing and contributed to a family member’s layoff, or how city zoning laws led to a local apartment shortage and a spike in rents), citizens would spontaneously become interested in conversing with strangers from other milieux, near and far. These small discussion circles, in turn, would become seedbeds for novel types of grass-roots action, through which everyday citizens could shape their own destinies instead of being ruled by distant bureaus and faceless bureaucrats. The Modern Epoch’s vision of alliances of small self-directing publics thus could be revitalized and updated.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Structural research, however, required that scholars be free of the pressures to conform emanating from the modern university and its bureaucratic sources of funding. Mills therefore recommended that political intellectuals reclaim “the cultural apparatus,” by which he meant the physical sites and material tools – literary magazines, community research centers, art galleries, movie studios, and so forth – through which scholars develop and disseminate their ideas. Scholar-run collectives not only might free intellectuals from the material pressures to serve bureaucracies; they might provide non-elites with models of how to form self-directing publics.[[92]](#footnote-92) Democratically committed intellectuals, however, should shun professional political parties whose bureaucratic apparatus and governing aspiration are at odds with the spontaneity of self-directing non-elite publics. The proper educational task of democratically oriented intellectuals, according to Mills, was to help non-elites notice social forces beyond their immediate milieux, and then allow public discussion groups to form spontaneously and autonomously determine what to do.[[93]](#footnote-93)

1. Conclusions

Scott and Mills looked aghast at the types of social science spreading across the United States after World War II. Both writers warned that scholars were neglecting the ways ordinary people experienced the world. The attention of academics had shifted to ahistorical categories, deductive reasoning, and the accumulation of quantifiable information. The result was non-democratic political scholarship, irrelevant to the needs, conditions, and understandings of most citizens.

Although Scott and Mills bemoaned the newest social-science fashions, they differed in their explanations for the recent intellectual developments. This led to a divergence in their recommendations on how best to respond.

Scott attributed the rise of fourth-order abstraction to the evangelic zeal of the mid-century positivist revolutionaries and their rational-choice progeny. He proposed private and intra-academy forms of resistance. He advised those political scientists who shared his unease to throw aside disciplinary fashions and to take seriously the thinking of everyday people. Even as he was about to assume the presidency of the American Political Science Association, he expressed doubts that institutional reform could move the discipline off its positivist course. He had “read enough about Michel’s Iron Law of Oligarchy” to be “under no illusions about the dent I’m going to make.”[[94]](#footnote-94) He found solace in the grand arc of history and assumed that positivism, like all earthly phenomena, will pass one day and new notions will guide the discipline. In the meantime, scholars with independent spirits should individually resist the profession’s grip on their imaginations and study the decentralized, informal, and often covert politics of non-elites.

Mills, who died in 1962, probably would have agreed with Scott’s critique of abstract categories and deductive logic and with Scott’s call for greater focus on the history-making abilities of ordinary people. However, Mills’ critique went far beyond the boundaries of the American academy, because he interpreted social scientists’ appetite for grand theorizing and data analysis as symptoms of a bigger social malady: the rise of bureaucratic societies. Therefore, academics needed to do more than individually cast aside their disciplines’ intellectual fashions. They needed to promote populist counterweights to the power of modern bureaucracies. They needed to help citizens realize that solutions to immediate troubles required conversation and collaboration with residents from other milieux. This pedagogic task, in turn, required that social scientists stop pursing the research agendas promoted by wealthy patrons and enormous bureaucracies. Instead, they should repossess magazines, lecture halls, and other materials necessary for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information about the structural sources of problems that citizens often experience as private matters.

Scott said little about educating the oppressed because, in his eyes, off-stage meetings, everyday resistance, and grassroots collaboration already are ubiquitous, despite scholars’ ignorance about that scale and style of politics. For Mills, however, these were challenging times. Bureaucratic organizations were expanding rapidly and choking the spirit of citizenship. To keep classical democratic dreams alive, social scientists needed to disseminate a structural worldview. If they did not, what lay ahead could be impersonal rule, cheerful robots, and the iron cages of bureaucracy.

1. Gerardo L. Munck and Richard Snyder, eds., *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), ix, x. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Snyder, “James C. Scott: Peasants, Power, and the Art of Resistance” in *Passion, Craft, and Method*, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a survey of alternative uses of “theory,” see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 316-318. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a sympathetic view of this division of labor see Munck’s opening essay in *Passion, Craft, and Method*. For a critical account, see Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision, Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 568-575. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Throughout the book, Snyder and Munck asked the respondents if they considered themselves “scientists” or “theorists,” suggesting that the two types of scholarship were opposites. A few interviewees, such as Robert Dahl, tried to reduce the gap between the role of normative theory and scientific research by suggesting that the best scientific scholarship assessed the accuracy of widely known claims made by widely known and often-cited theorists, such as Plato, Rousseau, Madison, and Marx. But even Dahl sharply distinguished the work he called “classical political theory” from the “scientific” work he undertook. Scott appears to have been the only interviewee to have been asked point-blank if he considered himself “a theorist.” Dahl, on the other hand, was asked if he considered himself “a scientist.” Richard Snyder, “Robert A. Dahl: Normative Theory, Empirical Research, and Democracy,” in Passion, Craft, and Method, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “James C. Scott,” 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “James C. Scott,” 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “James C. Scott,” 362, 372, 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. So far, I have not found “fourth-order abstraction” mentioned in my 8-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing and The Free Press, 1967)), although I uncovered a discussion of three “levels” of abstraction in an entry about Thomas Aquinas. Likewise, I could not find any references to four “orders,” “levels,” or “degrees” of abstraction in John Scott and Gordon Marshall, *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, Third Edition Revised* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009); or in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. James C. Scott, “Afterword to “Moral Economies, State Spaces, and Categorical Violence,” *American Anthropologist*, Sept. 2005 107(3): 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); James C. Scott, *Decoding Subaltern Politics: Ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics* (London: Routledge, 2013); James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Scott analyzed abstraction and various subtypes in *Seeing Like a State*, especially Parts 1 and 4. He repeated several key points in chapters 2, 5, and 6 of *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Seeing Like a State*, 296-300. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Seeing Like a State*, 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Seeing Like a State*, 132-146; *Two Cheers*, 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For examples of what Scott variously calls “infrapolitics,” “localism,” “off-stage politics,” and “little-tradition politics,” see *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); *Decoding Subaltern Politics*; “Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars,” *Theory and Society* Jan.-Mar. 1979, 97-134; “Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition,” *Theory and Society*, spring and summer 1977 4(1,2): 1-38, 211-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Seeing Like a State*, 206; *Art of Not Being Governed*, 19, 31-32, 135, 188, 215, 217-219, 260, 263-264, 289, 336; *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, 21, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Art of Not Being Gover*ned, 37. See also 113, 182, 207-210, 219, 257-259, 312-313, 332-333. See also *Against the Grain* and James Scott, “Hegemony and the Peasantry,” *Politics & Society* 1977 7(3): 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Scott systematically explored this watershed moment in *Against the Grain* and summarized some of his key points in *Decoding Subaltern Politics* and in the concluding chapter of *Art of Not Being Governed*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Against the Grain*, chap. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Against the Grain*, 145. For more on the differences Scott has drawn between types of abstraction found in early states and vernacular abstraction, see *Seeing Like a State*, 11-52, 64-73, 262-264; *Decoding Subaltern Politics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Against the Grain*, chaps. 5-6; *Art of Not Being Governed*, chaps. 4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Scott sometimes calls the content of these public tales “cosmic bluster” and hypothesizes that the more vulnerable the rulers feel, the more over-the-top their claims become. *Art of Not Being Governed*, 37, 99, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Art of Not Being Governed*, 98-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For Scott’s views on the origins of vernacular counter-ideologies, see “Protest and Profanation” and *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, 30-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Although Scott is not a technological determinist, he does recognize the impact of technological breakthroughs on political forms. See *Art of Not Being Governed*, 11, 166; *Seeing Like a State*, 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Seeing Like a State*, 4. See also 91-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Scott’s most detailed and systematic discussion of the high-modernist version of abstraction occurs in *Seeing Like a State*, especially chaps. 3-5, 8. See also *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, 110-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Seeing Like a State*, 91, 99. Scott has contended that this tendency was less pronounced in Western liberal democracies because of the widespread acceptance of liberal principles and elections. Nonetheless, high modernism was practiced in the West, for example, in programs to acculturate indigenous peoples. *Seeing Like a State*, 5, 101-102; *Decoding Subaltern Politics* 110-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Seeing Like a State*, 145, 22, 296-299. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For Scott’s contrast between “scientific skepticism” and “high modernist ideology,” see *Seeing Like a State*, 4, 87-102, 197, 242-243, 253-255, 304-306, 309-341. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Seeing Like a State*, 90-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For case studies of nonelite resistance to state reforms, see *Moral Economy*, *Weapons of the Weak*, *Seeing Like a State,* *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, and “Revolution in the Revolution.” One might say the study of popular rescue operations after grandiose state failures constitutes Scott’s research specialty. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Two Cheers*, xxi. See also “Revolution in the Revolution.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Seeing Like a State*, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Scott often closes his writings with rousing defenses of the benefits of non-elite resistance and insubordination. See *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 240; *Weapons of the Weak*, 350; *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, 141; “Revolution in the Revolution,” 129-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In this section, “positivism” will refer to an earlier twentieth-century European social movement with an identifiable membership, a formal organization, and a written manifesto. Of course, positivism also can be understood as an intellectual fashion that attracted diverse enthusiasts over several centuries. Compare, for example, Sheldon Wolin’s broad use of positivism in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 357-363, with H. Stuart Hughes’ far narrower notion in *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Random House, 1958). Nocola Abbagnano contrasts subtypes of positivism in “Positivism,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6, 414-419. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Recent histories of the Vienna Circle include Karl Sigmund, *Exact Thinking in Demented Times: The Vienna Circle and the Epic Quest for the Foundation of Science* (Boston, MA: Basic Books, 2017); David Edmonds, *The Murder of Professor Schlick: The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). Also useful are a memoir by Herbert Feigl, “The Wiener Kreis in America” in Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn, eds., *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930-1960* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 630-673; and the descriptions of different participants in the Circle in A.J. Ayer, “The Vienna Circle” in Gilbert Ryle, ed., *Revolution in Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1956), 70-87; Lee Cameron McDonald, *Western Political Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), 590-592; H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 397-401; and Janek Wasserman, *Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City, 1918-1938* (Cornell University Press, 2017), 106-131, 169-184. A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (New York: Free Press, 1959) contains essays in English by different members of the Circle. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Murder of Pressor Schlick*, 128*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. On Austria’s political tensions, see *Murder of Professor Schlick* and *Black Vienna*. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The relationship between Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle was fraught, akin to the relationship between an unpredictable parent and his admiring yet sometimes distrustful offspring. The Circle revered Russell, who sometimes jokingly described himself as the group’s grandfather. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Edmonds summarizes some enduring divisions within the Circle in the final chapter of *Murder of Professor Schlick*. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. A few leaders within the Circle believed in the paranormal and an afterlife, and at least one, Kurt Gödel, was a closet Platonist who believed an alternative world of permanent, numeric truths existed. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Both Edmonds (*Murder of Professor Schlick*, 131-138) and Wassarman (*Black Vienna*, 106-131) have argued that one can categorize the Circle’s political-economic vision as “socialist,” but only in a broad sense. Many members looked favorably upon government regulation of big businesses and the state’s provision of key services, such as subsidized housing and childhood education, for workers and other have nots. The group was hardly of one mind, however, about the collectivization of property, about handing policy-making power to either industrial workers or country folk, or about the Soviet Union’s experiments with vanguard-party rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Neurath’s group never got its quasi-party organization off the ground. But they ultimately did edit a multi-volume encyclopedia, joined planning committees for housing projects, and composed classroom primers with hopes of disseminating their purportedly non-partisan pictorial language of politics. One of the most influential manuscripts published under the aegis of the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* was Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which famously added to the Circle’s deductive and unified understanding of science the notion of science progressing through intermittent changes of the academic guard. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Wolin’s critical account of the diffusion of positivist thought in *Politics and Vision*, 357-363; and Lee Cameron McDonald more sympathetic account in *Western Political Theory* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), 582-605. Also useful are the Almond and Dahl interviews in *Passion, Craft, and Method,* and Feigl, “Wiener Kreis in America.” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. “James C. Scott,” 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. “James C. Scott,” 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. “James C. Scott,” 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. “James C. Scott,” 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. “James C. Scott,” 373. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. “James C. Scott,” 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, xxi-xxii. See also *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Against the Grain*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. “James C. Scott,” 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. “James C. Scott,” 382. Scott has a long history of decrying political scientists’ constant underestimation of humans’ creativity and agency. See, for example, *Art of Not Being Governed*, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, and “Peasant Revolution: A Dismal Science,” *Comparative Politics* Jan. 1977 9(2): 231-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. “James C. Scott,” 387. Scott makes similar critiques of rational-choice theory in *Moral Economy of the Peasant*; *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, 66, 147-148; and “Peasant Revolution,” 232, 239-240, 246-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. “James C. Scott,” 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. “James C. Scott,” 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. “James C. Scott,” 384-385. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. “James C. Scott,” 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. “James C. Scott,” 377. See also “Afterword,” 395-396; Clive Gabay, “Sisyphus on the Mountain: A Conversation with Professor James C. Scott,” *Development and Change* 2016 47(4); 872-874. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. “James C. Scott,” 388-389. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. “James C. Scott.” 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. “James C. Scott,” 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. “James C. Scott,” 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. “James C. Scott,” 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. “James C. Scott,” 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. “James C. Scott,” 362-364. See also 384, 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. “James C. Scott,” 370. Scott had offered similar advice before: “Peasant Revolution,” 244-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. “James C. Scott,” 365, 369-371. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. “James C. Scott,” 365-367, 381-382, 385-388. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *White Collar*, 348-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. For Mills’ paeans to various modern middle-class male roles – such as the independent shop keeper, the self-reliant yeoman farmer, the self-directing artisan (what Mills called a “craftsman”), and the self-cultivating intellectual (in Mills’ language, a “Renaissance man”) – see *White Collar*, 3-15, 217-225; “Man in the Middle,” 181-183; “Culture and Politics,” 201; “Decline of the Left,” 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *White Collar*, “Powerless People,” “Mass Society and Liberal Education,” “Culture and Politics.” [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. *White Collar*, 348-349; *Sociological Imagination*, 41, 52, 165-170, 182-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. “On Knowledge and Power,” 133. See also C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 343-361. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. “Powerless People,” 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. “Mass Society and Liberal Education,” 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. *White Collar*, 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. “Culture and Politics,” *Sociological Imagination*, 169-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. “Powerless People,” 17, 20-21; *Sociological Imagination*, 50-57, 64-75,101-106; *White Collar*, 142-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. “Powerless People,” 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. “Powerless People,” 13-23; *Sociological Imagination*, 101-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. “Powerless People,” 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. “Powerless People,” 22; *Sociological Imagination*, 18-19, 42, 48-49. 113-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *Sociological Imagination*, 26, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. *Sociological Imagination*, 25-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. *Sociological Imagination*, 40-47; “Knowledge and Power,” 134-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *Sociological Imagination*, 184-190; “Mass Society and Liberal Education,” 115-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. “Cultural Apparatus,” 204; “Decline of the Left,” 220-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *Power Elit*e, 226-231; *Sociological Imagination*, 177-194*; White Collar*, 342-350; C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left” in *Politics of Truth*, 261-266. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. “James C. Scott,” 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)