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Professor Who Learns From Peasants

By: JENNIFER SCHUESSLER - December 4, 2012

DURHAM, Conn. — The Yale political scientist James C. Scott may share his 46-acre farm in this picturesque hamlet with a flock of laying hens, a pair of Highland cattle and an active honeybee colony. But don't mistake him for your typical Connecticut country squire.

For Mr. Scott, the farm, about 20 miles northeast of New Haven, is both a place to blow off steam and an embodiment of the kind of hands-on, ground-up, local knowledge that he has championed during a career spanning five decades and a string of highly influential and idiosyncratic books.

"I'm as proud of knowing how to shear a sheep as I am of anything," Mr. Scott, who turned 76 on Sunday, said during a recent interview in the living room of his rustic 1826 farmhouse, seated across from a pair of rocking chairs draped with skins of home-butchered Montadales. "I've been a better scholar partly because I've had this other activity."

Mr. Scott's professional accomplishments are certainly considerable, even if the biographical note in his new book, "Two Cheers for Anarchism," cites his status as a "mediocre" beekeeper alongside his membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the official founder of Yale's agrarian studies program, as well as an unofficial founder of the field of "resistance studies," in which his book "Weapons of the Weak" (1985), a study of peasant resistance based on fieldwork in a Malaysian village, is a kind of Bible.

And his influence stretches far beyond the academic left, thanks to "Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed" (1998), a magisterial critique of top-down social planning that has been cited, and debated, by the free-market libertarians of the Cato Institute (which recently dedicated an issue of itsonline journal to the book), development economists and partisans of Occupy Wall Street alike.

"He's one of the people who has really demonstrated all the unintended bad consequences of people who think they can plan a city or economy or whole society, but he's not ideological about it," the conservative political theorist Francis Fukuyama said. He's also the kind of big thinker (and stylish writer), colleagues say, who has all but disappeared in his field: the last of a breed of wide-angled 20th-century social theorists, going back to Max Weber, to marry the insights of social science to the broad sweep of history, even as he cautions against putting too much faith in theory.

“He marches to his own drum completely,” said Ian Shapiro, a longtime colleague of Mr. Scott’s in the Yale political science department. While most social scientists pick apart problems in previous research, “Jim always starts with problems in the real world,” Mr. Shapiro said. “That’s why his work launches ships.”

“Two Cheers,” published by Princeton University Press, is a skiff of a book by Mr. Scott’s usual dreadnought standards, weighing in at a mere 149 pages, footnotes included. It is both a departure and a summing up, reprising the themes of his earlier books in a series of 29 playful, often highly personal “fragments,” making a case for what he calls “the anarchist squint.”

To most Americans the term anarchism probably invokes bomb-throwing radicals. But seen through Mr. Scott’s squint, anarchist principles are in action all around us, whether in jaywalking, the anti-SAT movement or assembly-line slowdowns — all examples, he contends, of everyday resistance to the rule of technocratic elites.

“Unlike the anarchists, I don’t believe the state will ever be abolished,” he said in the interview. “It’s a matter of taming it” — through the kind of lawbreaking and disruption, he argues, that have always been crucial to democratic political change.

The guarantees of equality in the Declaration of the Rights of Man or the Civil Rights Act, he continued, are “achievements of the state, but they are the achievements of the state with a pistol at its temple.”

Mr. Scott’s book arrives at a moment when the Occupy movement has brought anarchist thought closer to the American political mainstream than it has been in decades (and, some on the left have argued, has come undone because of its fetishization of utopian principle at the expense of real-world politics). He says he admires the movement’s “spontaneity,” but not everyone in its ranks is returning the love.

The left-wing writer Malcolm Harris, in The Los Angeles Review of Books, blasted Mr. Scott as a closet liberal in “anarchish” clothing, espousing a vision that’s “one part Bush Administration ‘ownership society,’ one part Apple ‘think different.’ ” Fortune.com, on the other hand, praised him for offering lessons in power and subversion useful to “leaders or managers” bent on “creative destruction.”

Mr. Scott, who calls himself a “crude Marxist” but defends family business and other “small property” as important buffers against state power, laughed heartily at the notion of hitting the management-guru circuit. A doctor’s son educated at Quaker schools outside Philadelphia, he said he began scholarly life as a fairly standard “left-wing professor.”

As a newly minted Ph.D. teaching at the University of Wisconsin in the early 1970s, he was active in the antiwar movement but soon realized — “if I do say so, more quickly than some of my friends,” he notes — that wars of national liberation often led to much more oppressive governments. “I began to think that if revolution doesn’t work for peasants, maybe there’s not that much to say for it,” he said.

In the late 1970s Mr. Scott took his family to a Malaysian village for two years of fieldwork, despite colleagues’ warnings that it would be a “career-killing” move for a political scientist. The result was “Weapons of the Weak,” which (along with a follow-up,

“Domination and the Arts of Resistance”) explored the ways peasants and other powerless people used evasion and subterfuge, rather than direct confrontation, to thwart efforts at centralized state control.

“Seeing Like a State,” published a decade later, looked at the limitations of state power from the other end, examining — through examples as diverse as 18th-century German scientific forestry and “villagization” in 1970s Tanzania — the way that “high modernist” social engineering doomed itself by ignoring local custom and practical knowledge, which Mr. Scott, borrowing the classical Greek word for wisdom, calls “metis.”

Mr. Scott has also been a longstanding critic of what he sees as the overconfident hyper-rationalism of political science itself, which has sacrificed its own kind of metis in favor of statistical analysis and abstract, immutable laws of political behavior. These days he’s flattered to be so often misidentified as an anthropologist.
“An anthropologist goes in and tries to have as few prejudices as possible and be as open as possible to where the world leads you,” he said, “whereas a political scientist would go in with a questionnaire.”

Mr. Scott has no idea what his academic colleagues will make of his quirky new book. But he said he’d always been less concerned with “defending turf,” as he puts it, than with moving on to wherever curiosity leads him. For now, that includes learning Burmese, teaching a seminar on the politics and ecology of rivers, and researching a new book on the “deep history” of plant and animal domestication.

“I just love raising animals,” he said before inviting a departing visitor to pluck a dozen freshly laid eggs from his ramshackle chicken coop. “It’s good to have something that requires your body and leaves your mind alone.”