

James C. Scott

Peasants and the State



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My plan for research was and is an effort to understand why the state has nearly always been the enemy of "people who move around". By the term "people who move around" I deliberately mean to be vague. At one extreme I mean hunters and gatherers and nomads. But I also mean homeless, vagrants, gypsies, itinerant artisans, entertainers, petty traders, smugglers, etc. There is something about the state that encourages (forces?) permanent settlement. The reasons for forced settlement of one kind or another are not only fiscal and defensive but also, I believe, an imperative of social control in otherwise sedentary societies. At one level I am, of course, dealing with "trespassing and boundary crossing of all kinds" in which one might arguably include homosexuals, hobos, etc. But I want to begin small — with a study of the hill peoples of Burma and their relations with the lowland Burman state. This will include especially the ways in which the hill peoples have seen the state and the way in which the state has seen the hill peoples ever since we have had records to consult. That is, the history of mentalities is as important as the record of treaties, laws, conflicts.

Since the Burmese materials are hard to come by in Berlin, I have concentrated on the abundant material on nomads in Eurasia and Africa as

well as on gypsies. I have made some progress, especially in thinking through my approach, but I would be less than candid if I said I had made substantial progress in my research.

The simple fact is that I have been almost completely derailed from my customary tracks ever since my arrival. I have spent the bulk of my year studying German which I had never studied before, meeting German colleagues, participating in seminars, giving lectures, and taking some lessons in pastel and watercolor painting. The Puritan, Quaker side of my upbringing tells me I have wasted much of my year while the less 'driven' side of me tells me that this is the purpose of a sabbatical and that, in any case, the left side of my brain has benefited greatly.

I came early on purpose to spend six weeks living with a peasant family in a tiny village in the ex-DDR (Pleetz near Neubrandenburg). Reinhard Prasser arranged this, for which I am exceptionally grateful. This experience and the unsettling knowledge I have always had of the imperialistic advantage every native English-speaker enjoys in the world — at the expense of others — made me want to learn at least rudimentary German. My desire to participate in conferences here, to deal with German colleagues in German, and to read novels and work in my field also in German, did the rest. I *do* now follow lectures and debates in German. I have actually given five lectures in German, the last of which (at *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*) I wrote myself, though it needed much emergency room surgery to make it reasonably correct. I read material in my field slowly but with relish. I speak a lot of German, but badly! It represents a tremendous investment of time and I am glad I made it, although at the end of this year my German colleagues all still speak and write a better English than I German! Still I think it's fair to say that I am now connected to the world of German language research in my field in a way that is enduring and important intellectually. I refrain from assessing the level of my painting and drawing except to say it is appreciably worse than my German.

While in Berlin I've participated, by giving talks, in three "Tagungen" at the *Freie Universität* (on "The Social Embedding of the Economy", "The Study of Social Movements", and "Hunger — Popular and State Response in European History and the Third World") as well as having given two other lectures in the *Freie Universität*, one at *Humboldt Universität*, and one at the *Technische Universität*. Elsewhere in Germany I have given lectures at Münster, Bielefeld, Göttingen (*Max-Planck-Institut für Soziale Geschichte*), and Bayreuth. No doubt I overextended myself in this direction, but I felt it would also contribute to my facility with German. In this context it is worth noting that I took at least nine hours of conversational German instruction with tutors every week I was in Berlin. Further afield I

have lectured and participated in conferences on peasants and/or Southeast Asia in Holland, Sweden, and Denmark.

If I had put my head down and ignored my surroundings I could have completed a manuscript of a new book — I hope an important one too. But I chose to hurl myself at German, Germany, Berlin ... and I am pleased that I did. My good feeling is that it was the right thing to do. Only time will tell. I am immensely grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for having made such a choice possible.