

Moral Economy in Its Place: The Contribution of James C. Scott

James C. Scott's credentials as a theorist of the moral economy would seem to be impeccable. Not only did he give the term additional currency in his 1976 book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant (MEP)*; he also genuflected toward E. P. Thompson's discussions of moral economy when he invoked the concept.¹ Nevertheless, I will argue that, for Scott, "moral economy" was a label of convenience. When he wrote under this heading, he was more concerned with a larger set of issues in social and political theory—including exploitation, false consciousness, and legitimacy—than was encompassed by moral economy in its Thompsonian sense. As I note at the end of the essay, we could resolve this apparent tension by expanding the concept of moral economy, thereby putting Scott back into the conversation. I suspect, however, that this move probably dissolves the claim that the emergence of the idea of moral economy in the twentieth century represents an innovation in the history of modern political thought.²

Moral Economy

Let us begin by considering some examples of Scott's use of "moral economy" in *MEP*. These instances are revealing of Scott's principally strategic interest in using the term:

Readers will note that the study of the moral economy of the peasantry, while it begins in the domain of economics, must end in the study of peasant culture and religion. I have tried to indicate, especially when discussing the problem of false consciousness, the lines along which such an inquiry might proceed.³

If we understand the rage and indignation which prompted [peasant rebels] to risk everything, we can grasp what I have chosen to call their moral economy: their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation—their view of which claims on their product were tolerable and which intolerable.⁴

The evidence within the Southeast Asian context indicates that structural change in the colonial period permitted elites and the state, to their short-run profit, to increasingly violate the moral economy of the peasantry and become more exploitative.⁵

The concept of false consciousness overlooks the real possibility that the actor's "problem" is not simply one of misperception. It overlooks the possibility that he may, in fact, have his own durable standards of equity and exploitation—standards that lead

him to judgments about his situation that are quite different from those of an outside observer with a deductive theory. To put it bluntly, the actor may have his own moral economy.⁶

I will concentrate on what is obviously different here from Thompson's approach.⁷ First, Scott is evidently preoccupied by the problem of false consciousness. For Scott, to reconstruct the peasant's "moral economy" is to reject the vulgar Gramscian claim that peasants' "failure" to articulate their objective class situation must be the result of ideological domination. To be sure, Thompson denounced deductive accounts of what working people ought to have felt or done on the basis of their standard of living or in relation to the mode of production.⁸ But, unlike Scott, he never dealt seriously with questions of ideology and hegemony, even in his famous broadside against Louis Althusser.⁹ For Thompson, "moral economy" was about recovering the plebian experience of class struggle, while for Scott it is about exploring the limits of existing theories of ideology. While not mutually exclusive, these different usages would eventually take Scott away from the thematization of moral economy as a practice in its own right.

Second, there is no whisper in Thompson of the notion that the study of the moral economy of working people must begin, as Scott insists, with "economics"—specifically, with a defense of nonmaximizing principles of choice under uncertainty. Thompson saw modern economics and economic history as of a piece with the classical political economy that eroded the social contract between workers and elites during the Industrial Revolution. Scott, on the other hand, is unabashed about treating his peasants as risk-averse rational actors, whose proximity to the subsistence margin forces them to be "satisficers" or surprise-minimizers, rather than maximizers of average net returns.¹⁰ For Scott, modern decision theory set the terms of the existential dilemma to which moral economy was a response.¹¹

Finally, Scott returns again and again to the problem of fixing standards of exploitation. Perhaps the central question of *MEP* is: when can we expect that exploitation will lead to peasant rebellions against elites? And the assumption underpinning this question is that there seems to be no automatic link between exploitation according to a criterion *X* and acts of rebellion. Attempts to define exploitation according to some quantitative metric—the standard of living, say, or the level of expropriation of surplus labor power—were, for Scott, poor predictors of peasant behavior. We should note that the pivotal fifth chapter of *The Making of the English Working Class* is titled "Exploitation." In it, Thompson presents the key claim that the damage wrought by the factory system can only be understood normatively, in terms of the expression of injustice and oppression felt by working people as their customary rights and economic security were swept away by industrialism.¹² Nonetheless, Thompson, unlike Scott, has no theory of rebellion as a *function* of exploitation—none, at least, beyond the desire to repudiate claims about workers' well-being based on macroeconomic metrics. Indeed, Thompson is only interested in food riots, not rebellion in general. In contrast, the search for the proper criteria of social and economic exploitation, as part of a broader theory of social domination and resistance, are at the center of Scott's concerns in *MEP*. I shall return to this topic in the next section.

The differences between these approaches are magnified when we turn to Scott's later

works. Discussion of moral economy drops out of Scott's writing after *MEP*. It is not evoked (so far as I can see) as an analytical category in any of his subsequent books. When he refers back to *MEP*, he does so when discussing the theory of exploitation and ideological hegemony, not "the moral economy of the peasant."¹³ Moreover, whereas Thompson was concerned above all with how the "metaphor of the market," as propounded by exponents of the "science" of economics, destroyed earlier, plebian understandings of markets and their proper regulation, Scott has shown much less interest in the practical and theoretical damage done by markets and their ideologues.¹⁴

In the light of these observations, it is the brevity of Scott's dalliance with the idea of moral economy, not the fact that he invoked it, that requires explanation. My thesis is that Thompson's focus on subsistence rights gave Scott a useful hook on which to hang his own views about exploitation and legitimacy. Scott's interest in these issues was far from unusual: the 1960s and 1970s saw a number of attempts to link a new sociology of power with normative questions of social justice. The Thompsonian discourse of moral economy was largely innocent of these wider discussions in the social sciences and political theory. After the publication of *MEP*, Scott was able to enlarge his initial, Thompson-inspired framework. This shift allowed him to drop the references to moral economy, and to talk more directly about exploitation, ideology, and legitimacy. This is what I shall now try to show.

Exploitation, Ideology, and Legitimacy

We turn first to the sociology of power. For Scott and his collaborators in the 1970s, the study of relationships of power had been revitalized by a growing literature on patron-client relations in the fields of anthropology, political science, sociology, social psychology, and history.¹⁵ Clientelist structures were seen as a singular yet nearly ubiquitous form of social bond: they were distinct from the relations between citizens in the civil sphere, from the relations of buyer and seller in the marketplace, from class relations, and from the ties of kinship or religious fellowship—although any of these factors might enter in to the sustenance of clientelist relations. Nor was the patron-client relation one of sheer unmediated power between superior and inferior, since in that case one could simply speak of coercion. Rather, the key to the new theory of clientelism was provided by the proposition that all social relationships involved *exchange* of some sort of another, and that the condition of all stable exchange in a social group was the principle of *reciprocity*. This thesis traced its roots back to Simmel, but was widely understood to draw as well on anthropological accounts of nonmarket exchange and norms of reciprocity, especially as presented in the work of Mauss, Durkheim, and Malinowski.¹⁶ The theory of social exchange had been updated by George Homans and Peter Blau, and also by anthropologists studying the shifting modes of sociability and political factionalism in the new "complex" societies the emerging in the Global South.¹⁷

In the 1970s, Scott was one of the major figures in the study of clientelism, and he zeroed in on the theory of patron-client bonds in a crucial passage of *MEP*: "It is critical to understand that the obligation of reciprocity is a moral principle par excellence and that it applies as strongly to relationships between unequals as between equals. In peasant societies not yet permeated by class cleavage, these relationships commonly take the form of patron-client bonds. The extensive anthropological literature on these characteristic

social ties between elites and their clients emphasizes the moral idea of reciprocity, mutual rights, and obligations, which gives them their social force.”¹⁸ Even relationships between unequals, then—lord and peasant, mafia boss and henchman, ward-heeler and voter—were seen by subordinates in terms of a working norm of fairness or reciprocity in exchange. To take Scott’s central case in *MEP*, peasants would give elites—in the usual case, landowners—their obedience and deference so long as elites were seen to provide insurance against starvation. According to the norm of reciprocity, peasants would accord legitimacy to elite power so long as elites reciprocated by bearing some of the risk of starvation faced by peasants. Conversely, insofar as elites violated the norm of reciprocity by forcing more of the burden of risk onto peasants—whether through neglect, ineptitude, or by making claims that would force peasants below the subsistence line—elite power would lose legitimacy and peasants might rebel against the social order in the name of their right to subsistence, under the norm of reciprocity.¹⁹

For Scott, the framework of reciprocity, and the claims of entitlement possible within it, were crucial for understanding the attitudes of peasants toward the social orders in which they lived. In order to grasp the changing role of the global peasantry in the struggles that were shaping the new nation-states of Asia and Africa, Scott maintained, one had to identify the working conceptions of equity and exploitation that drove peasant groups to accept certain forms of rule, and rebel against others. This was why it was important to study the “moral economy of the peasant.”

The critical challenge for Scott’s approach, however, was to uncover the demotic conceptions of justice—of legitimacy and illegitimacy, fairness and exploitation—that guided peasant behavior. Here we come to the interface between the new sociology of power, on the one hand, and normative theories of justice and exploitation, on the other. For Scott and other writers working in this area, it was axiomatic that individuals’ judgments of fairness were necessarily contextual; there could be no fixed quantitative metric of “equal value” among the various goods—legitimation, protection, subsistence goods—exchanged between patrons and clients. This was why social research had a key role in the theory of social justice. Yet it was difficult to recover these views, and to see how any particular claims of injustice or exploitation came to be seen as justified by client groups—by peasants, in Scott’s case. As Barrington Moore observed, many social scientists concluded that the inability to strictly quantify exploitation meant that “the concept of ‘exploitation’ is a wholly subjective one, no more than a political epithet.”²⁰ At best, neoclassical economists allowed that exploitation might exist, but only when market exchange was based on force or fraud. The Marxists, meanwhile, had conjured the problem away by assuming that exploitation was measured by the level of expropriation of surplus value: “Inasmuch as all value flows ultimately from labor, the surplus value appropriated by the mere ownership of the means of production in the form of rent, profits, and interest provides a measure of exploitation.”²¹ Indeed, this “objective” account of the exploitation of labor became the standard against which class consciousness was to be assessed: where workers did not themselves appear to grasp the objective character of their exploitation—when they failed to attain the form of class consciousness prescribed to them by Marxist theorists—they were presumed to be in the grip of false consciousness, the stooges of hegemonic power.

According to this line of criticism, then, both Marxists and liberal social scientists

evaded or dismissed the problem of reconstructing workers' own conceptions of equity and justice. They treated exploitation either as a chimera, a market inefficiency, or an objective feature of class relations. For those seeking a more natural unity of social science and political theory, the challenge was to find a way of using empirical social research to extract normative concepts of equity, exploitation, and reciprocity. Before Scott, writers such as W. G. Runciman and Barrington Moore had tackled this problem.²² And after him, political theorists like Axel Honneth and David Miller have addressed the topic.²³ When Scott was preparing *MEP*, he seems to have realized that Thompson (among others) offered him an ideal way of taking on this issue. If the scope for peasant judgments of reciprocity or fair value in exchange was often too wide to support firm conclusions about the criteria they used to decide what claims upon them by elites were legitimate, and which not, the imperative of subsistence and the explosive phenomenon of the food riot presented Scott with at least one clear and unambiguous criterion.²⁴ He made this clear in his first published reference to Thompson: "The legitimacy of the patron is not simply a linear function of the balance of exchange; there are certain thresholds or "sticking points" in the balance which produce sharp changes in legitimacy. In particular, the irreducible minimum terms traditionally demanded by the peasant/client are physical security and a subsistence livelihood. This expectation is at the root of the peasantry's 'paternalist moral economy' [here citing Thompson]—the basis of its conception of justice and equity."²⁵ Thus, Scott's overarching aim was to access his actors' (intrinsically normative) view of exploitation and legitimacy; what he discovered in Thompson was that the extreme (if not, alas, uncommon) situation of a subsistence crisis presented him with a clear threshold across which peasant judgments about the legitimacy of elite power could be expected to vary sharply. But his appeal to subsistence rights, in this context, was a strategic move, not a declaration of commitment to the moral economy paradigm.

Over time, Scott was able to move on from "moral economy" concerns with the politics of dearth to a much more fine-grained account (no pun intended) of peasant judgments about the legitimacy of the elites with whom they dealt. His fieldwork in Malaysia in 1978–80 allowed him to see how peasant norms operated not just in claims on elites during subsistence crises, but also in regard to more prosaic matters such as disputes over rents between tenant farmers and owners.²⁶ By the time he published *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott had sufficiently developed his understanding of the languages of legitimation and their "offstage" counterparts to set out a full-scale critique of Marxist theories of hegemony and false consciousness, which, as we have seen, were already in his sights in *MEP*.²⁷ The failure of these theories to make sense of peasant politics set the stage for Scott's argument that only an empirical or ethnographic grasp of collective views of justice and equity could explain the actions of subordinate classes in highly inequalitarian societies. Subsistence politics remained a special case in Scott's broader analysis of peasant politics. After *MEP*, it was never the central issue in Scott's study of peasant politics.

A final measure of Scott's divergence from the moral economy tradition may be found in his proverbial obsession with the damage that states can do to ordinary norms and modes of mutuality. Figures within the moral economy tradition—Tawney, Polanyi, Thompson—have been most concerned with the damage that unfettered markets can do, especially in the case of subsistence goods. While Scott has often shared these criticisms of marketization, his focus on the wider domain of peasant normativity and politics has

drawn him toward the agent he sees as most active in trying to “discipline” peasants and counteract their normative order: namely, the developmentalist or socialist state, with its insatiable desire to made the activities of subordinate groups “legible” and thus controllable.²⁸

Reflecting on Scott’s place in the moral economy tradition forces us to make a choice. According to the reading I have given in this essay, we can expect little insight from the assimilation of Scott’s work into the history of the idea of the moral economy, since his major theoretical concerns lie elsewhere. On the other hand, one might wish nonetheless to find ways of plugging Scott into the tradition. But my sense is that, to do so, we must break away from Thompson’s framing of the topic, and revert to a looser, but potentially more productive, definition. The modern anthropology of gift exchange, coupled with the rise of social exchange theory and the study of political clientelism, emboldened Scott to shift the debate about the moral status of markets away from its foundations in natural jurisprudence, while at the same time keeping questions of rights and needs firmly in the picture. This way of reading Scott makes the history of moral economy into a chapter of the history of modern political thought. Whether that is a viable redoubt for the idea of moral economy is an open question, since it would seem to rob the concept of moral economy, as a twentieth-century innovation, of its novelty, and it forces the debate onto a much wider terrain than the one scouted by Thompson. No wonder Thompson resisted this move.²⁹ Should we?

NOTES

1. James C. Scott, “The Erosion of Patron-Client Bonds and Social Change in Rural Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 32, no. 1 (November 1972): 7; James C. Scott *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 32–33 (hereafter *MEP*).

2. “Moral economy” entered the lexicon of European political thought in the eighteenth century, but its present meaning and currency in the social sciences was fixed by Thompson. See Norbert Götz, “‘Moral Economy’: Its Conceptual History and Analytical Prospects,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 11, no. 2 (August 2015): 147–62.

3. Scott, *MEP*, vii.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 157.

6. *Ibid.*, 160.

7. There are of course some important similarities, which I do not discuss here due to limited space. Thompson himself was keenly aware of the subtle differences between his approach and Scott’s. *Of MEP* he said that “the term is drawn from my own essay but it is now brought to bear upon ‘peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity.’” Thompson concludes that “there is some likeness here to the moral economy of the eighteenth-century English crowd, although Scott does not elaborate the comparison, and he is in fact more interested in patron-client relations in the village than in those confrontations or negotiations which mark the European tradition of food riot.” Thompson, “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” in *Customs in Common* (New York: New Press, 1991), 341–42.

8. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, new ed. (London: Penguin, 1991), 8–9, 14, 209 (hereafter *MEWC*).

9. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors,” in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 1–210.

10. Scott, *MEP*, 13–34. Satisficing is Herbert Simon’s term for an alternative principle of rational decision to that of (the impossible standard of) maximization of expected returns.

11. Scott’s main inspiration for this argument was the economist James Roumasset, who was Scott’s colleague at the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when Scott was working on *MEP*. The text of Roumasset’s that underpins Scott’s account of the “economics of the subsistence ethic” is “Risk and Choice of Technique for Peasant Agriculture: Safety First and Rice Production in the Philippines,” Social Systems Research Institute, University of Wisconsin, August 1971. A more elaborate presentation of the safety-first principle as the explanans for farmers’ resistance to agricultural innovation is given in Roumasset, *Rice and Risk: Decision-Making Among Low-Income Farmers* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1976), 13–47.

Roumasset drew on two literatures in his theory of safety-first agricultural enterprise: theories of portfolio management and critiques of subjective expected utility in decision theory. For a general orientation, see Kenneth J. Arrow, "Alternative Approaches to the Theory of Choice in Risk-Taking Situations," *Econometrica* 19, no. 4 (October 1951): 404–37.

12. Thompson, *MEWC*, 207–32.

13. See, for example, James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 190 fn.9.

14. Thompson, "Moral Economy Reviewed," 259, 273–74, 304–5. In Scott's case, James Ferguson notes, "the almost tossed-off claim in the introduction to *Seeing Like a State* that the dynamics of standardization, homogenization, and grid making so convincingly identified as integral to 'seeing like a state' applies equally well to our contemporary world of downsized states and unrestrained global corporations." In his writings, Scott focuses overwhelmingly on the depredations of developmentalist and socialist states, rather than on the standardization that comes with unrestrained markets and corporations. James Ferguson, "Seeing like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (September 2005): 378. Is Scott lured by the metaphor of the market? Brad DeLong detects in *Seeing Like a State* "evidence of a profound subconscious anxiety" about its debts to Austrian celebrants of market-based "open societies" such as Von Mises and Hayek. See Brad DeLong, "James Scott and Friedrich Hayek," October 7, 2007, <http://delong.typepad.com/sdj/2007/10/james-scott-and.html>.

15. This literature, as Scott himself notes, is enormous and defies encapsulation in a footnote. For the state of the art c. 1976, see Steffan W. Schmidt, Laura Guasti, Carl H. Landé, and James C. Scott, *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), esp. James C. Scott, "Political Clientelism: A Bibliographical Essay," 483–505.

16. Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Its Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, expanded edition, trans. Jane I. Guyer (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016); Émile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, trans. Cornelia Brookfield (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 208–20; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (New York: Humanities Press, 1951), 46–49.

17. George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961); Peter M. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964); Alvin W. Gouldner, "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement," *American Sociological Review* 25, no. 2 (April 1960): 161–78; Eric R. Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (December 1956): 1065–78; Scott, "Political Clientelism."

18. Scott, *MEP*, 168–69.

19. *Ibid.*, 167–71.

20. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, new ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 470. First published in 1966.

21. Scott, *MEP*, 158.

22. W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes to Social Inequality in Twentieth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery, and upon Certain Proposals to Eliminate Them* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Moore, Jr., *Social Origins*. In a parallel but distinct effort to yoke social observation and normative principles, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) deploys the method of reflective equilibrium. In Rawls's case, of course, his raw material was not social surveys (Runciman), history (Moore), or ethnography (Scott), but "intuitive judgments of justice," which the method of reflective equilibrium could then work into normative shape. David Miller, *Principles of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 53–59, has pointed out that Rawls's refusal to countenance empirical research on social attitudes to justice was undermotivated and constitutes a major weakness of his theory of justice. Social choice theory is yet another mechanism, at least in principle, for yoking actual sets of preferences or attitudes to normative principles; while Kenneth Arrow famously insisted that there was no democratic method—neither voting nor the market—for passing from one to the other, Amartya Sen has spent his career demonstrating that the prospects for moving from everyday sentiments and preferences to collective normative judgments on matters of justice are not as bleak as Arrow suggested. See Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin, 2010); Amartya Sen, "Economics, Law, and Ethics," in *Against Injustice: The New Economics of Amartya Sen*, ed. Reiko Gotoh and Paul Dumouchel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 39–54.

23. See, for example, Axel Honneth (discussing *inter alia* later work of Moore's), "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination," in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Charles W. Wright (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 205–19; Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), esp. 98–134; Miller, *Principles*; Adam Swift, "Social Justice: Why Does It Matter What the People Think?" in *Forms of Justice: Critical Perspectives on David Miller's Political Philosophy*, ed. David A. Bell and Avner de-Shalit (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 13–28. See also Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

24. As Thompson observes in “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” Scott was in practice not terribly interested in “the tradition of food riot” *per se*. See the quotation at note 3. I speculate that what Scott liked in Thompson was what he also liked in the earlier literature on crowds by George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm, namely, that they provided a model for how to extract the normative basis of mass social phenomena like food riots and other forms of (supposedly irrational or instinctive) “mob” behavior.

25. Scott, “Erosion of Patron-Client Bonds,” 7.

26. Scott, *Weapons*, 204–12.

27. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 70–107.

28. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Scott observes that “the conclusions that can be drawn from the failures of modern projects of social engineering are as applicable to market-driven standardization as they are to bureaucratic homogeneity” (10) but he does not pursue the comparison. If anything, in Scott’s recent work, the state has loomed even larger as the source of all the ills of modernity. See Samuel Moyn, “Barbarian Virtues,” *The Nation*, October 23, 2017. See note 14 for further discussion.

29. For Thompson’s (characteristically polemical) response to Hont and Ignatieff, see “Moral Economy Reviewed,” 274–83.

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