



JAMES C. SCOTT  
**Weapons**  
of the **Weak**  
*Everyday Forms of  
Peasant Resistance*

# Weapons of the Weak

EVERYDAY FORMS OF  
PEASANT RESISTANCE

James C. Scott

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# Weapons of the Weak

*For Skip, Bernice, and Elinore  
and with gratitude to Z and other friends in "Sedaka"*

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It is clear that no Herostratus among them has dared to go into the remote countryside to study the permanent conspiracy of those whom we still call "the weak" against those who believe themselves "strong"—of the peasantry against the rich. . . . is it not critical to portray at last this peasant who thwarts the [legal] Code by reducing private property into something that simultaneously exists and does not exist? You shall see this tireless sapper, this nibbler, gnawing the land into little bits, carving an acre into a hundred pieces, and invited always to this feast by a petite bourgeoisie which finds in him, at the same time, its ally and its prey. . . . Out of the reach of the law by virtue of his insignificance, this Robespierre, with a single head and twenty million hands, works ceaselessly, crouching in every commune . . . bearing arms in the National Guard in every district of France, since by 1830, France does not recall that Napoleon preferred to run the risk of his misfortunes rather than to arm the masses.

Honoré de Balzac  
Letter to P. S. B. Gavault  
introducing *Les Paysans*

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Do not imagine that Tonsard, or his old mother or his wife and children ever said in so many words, "we steal for a living and do our stealing cleverly." These habits had grown slowly. The family began by mixing a few green boughs with the dead wood; then, emboldened by habit and by a calculated impunity (part of the scheme to be developed in this story), after twenty years the family had gotten to the point of taking the wood as if it were *their own* and making a living almost entirely by theft. The rights of pasturing their cows, the abuse of gleaning grain, of gleaning grapes, had gotten established little by little in this fashion. By the time the Tonsards and the other lazy peasants of the valley had tasted the benefits of these four rights acquired by the poor in the countryside, rights pushed to the point of pillage, one can imagine that they were unlikely to renounce them unless compelled by a force stronger than their audacity.

Balzac, *Les Paysans*

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There is another problem about the political definition of resistance. If one turns, not to the fictitious schema of the disciplined subject but to the question of what it is for real people to reject or refuse, or on the other hand in some manner to consent to, acquiesce in, or accept the subjection of themselves or of others, it becomes apparent that the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one. The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual, autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and deflect the visible facts of overall domination, and whose purposes and calculations, desires and choices resist any simple division into the political and the apolitical. The schema of a strategy of resistance as a vanguard of politicisation needs to be subjected to re-examination, and ac-

count must be taken of resistances whose strategy is one of evasion or defence—the Schweijks as well as the Solzhenitsyns. There are no good subjects of resistance.

Colin Gordon on Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*

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## Preface

The limitations of any field of study are most strikingly revealed in its shared definitions of what counts as relevant. A great deal of the recent work on the peasantry—my own as well as that of others—concerns rebellions and revolutions. Excepting always the standard ethnographic accounts of kinship, ritual, cultivation, and language—it is fair to say that much attention has been devoted to organized, large-scale, protest movements that appear, if only momentarily, to pose a threat to the state. I can think of a host of mutually reinforcing reasons why this shared understanding of relevance should prevail. On the left, it is apparent that the inordinate attention devoted to peasant insurrections was stimulated by the Vietnam war and by a now fading left-wing, academic romance with wars of national liberation. The historical record and the archives—both resolutely centered on the state's interests—abetted this romance by not mentioning peasants except when their activities were menacing. Otherwise the peasantry appeared only as anonymous contributors to statistics on conscription, crop production, taxes, and so forth. There was something for everyone in this perspective. For some, it emphasized willy-nilly the role of outsiders—prophets, radical intelligentsia, political parties—in mobilizing an otherwise supine, disorganized peasantry. For others, it focused on just the kinds of movements with which social scientists in the West were most familiar—those with names, banners, tables of organization, and formal leadership. For still others, it had the merit of examining precisely those movements that seemed to promise large-scale, structural change at the level of the state.

What is missing from this perspective, I believe, is the simple fact that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Or, better stated, such activity was dangerous, if not suicidal. Even when the option did exist, it is not clear that the same objectives might not also be pursued by other stratagems. Most subordinate classes are, after all, far less interested in changing the larger structures of the state and the law than in what Hobsbawm has appropriately called "working the system . . . to their minimum disadvantage."<sup>1</sup> Formal, organized political activity, even if clandestine and revolutionary, is typically the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia; to look for peasant politics in this realm is to look largely in vain. It is also—not incidentally—the first step toward concluding that the peasantry is a political nullity unless organized and led by outsiders.

And for all their importance when they do occur, peasant rebellions—let alone

1. Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973): 3–22.



revolutions—are few and far between. The vast majority are crushed unceremoniously. When, more rarely, they do succeed, it is a melancholy fact that the consequences are seldom what the peasantry had in mind. Whatever else revolutions may achieve—and I have no desire to gainsay these achievements—they also typically bring into being a vaster and more dominant state apparatus that is capable of battenning itself on its peasant subjects even more effectively than its predecessors.

For these reasons it seemed to me more important to understand what we might call *everyday* forms of peasant resistance—the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most forms of this struggle stop well short of outright collective defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on. These Brechtian—or Schweikian—forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand much of what the peasantry has historically done to defend its interests against both conservative and progressive orders. It is my guess that just such kinds of resistance are often the most significant and the most effective over the long run. Thus, Marc Bloch, the historian of feudalism, has noted that the great millennial movements were “flashes in the pan” compared to the “patient, silent struggles stubbornly carried on by rural communities” to avoid claims on their surplus and to assert their rights to the means of production—for example, arable, woodland, pastures.<sup>2</sup> Much the same view is surely appropriate to the study of slavery in the New World. The rare, heroic, and foredoomed gestures of a Nat Turner or a John Brown are simply not the places to look for the struggle between slaves and their owners. One must look rather at the constant, grinding conflict over work, food, autonomy, ritual—at everyday forms of resistance. In the Third World it is rare for peasants to risk an outright confrontation with the authorities over taxes, cropping patterns, development policies, or onerous new laws; instead they are likely to nibble away at such policies by noncompliance, foot dragging, deception. In place of a land invasion, they prefer piecemeal squatting; in place of open mutiny, they prefer desertion; in place of attacks on public or private grain stores, they prefer pilfering. When such stratagems are abandoned in favor of more quixotic action, it is usually a sign of great desperation.

Such low-profile techniques are admirably suited to the social structure of the

2. Marc Bloch, *French Rural History*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970), 170.

peasantry—a class scattered across the countryside, lacking formal organization, and best equipped for extended, guerrilla-style, defensive campaigns of attrition. Their individual acts of foot dragging and evasion, reinforced by a venerable popular culture of resistance and multiplied many thousand-fold, may, in the end, make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would-be superiors in the capital. Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own. It is largely in this fashion that the peasantry makes its political presence felt. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such reefs, attention is usually directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible. For these reasons alone, it seems important to understand this quiet and anonymous welter of peasant action.

To this end, I spent two years (1978–80) in a Malaysian village. The village, which I call Sedaka, not its real name, was a small (seventy-household), rice-farming community in the main paddy-growing area of Kedah, which had begun double-cropping in 1972. As in so many other “green revolutions” the rich have gotten richer and the poor have remained poor or grown poorer. The introduction of huge combine-harvesters in 1976 was perhaps the coup de grace, as it eliminated two-thirds of the wage-earning opportunities for smallholders and landless laborers. In the course of two years I managed to collect an enormous amount of relevant material. My attention was directed as much to the ideological struggle in the village—which underwrites resistance—as to the practice of resistance itself. Throughout the book I try to raise the larger issues of resistance, class struggle, and ideological domination that give these issues their practical and theoretical significance.

The struggle between rich and poor in Sedaka is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain, and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history. The details of this struggle are not pretty, as they entail backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt which, for the most part, are confined to the backstage of village life. In public life—that is to say, in power-laden settings—a carefully calculated conformity prevails for the most part. What is remarkable about this aspect of class conflict is the extent to which it requires a shared worldview. Neither gossip nor character assassination, for example, makes much sense unless there are shared standards of what is deviant, unworthy, impolite. In one sense, the ferociousness of the argument *depends* on the fact that it appeals to shared values that have been, it is claimed, betrayed. What is in dispute is not values but the facts to which those values might apply: who is rich, who is poor, how rich, how poor, is so-and-so stingy, does so-and-so shirk work? Apart

from the sanctioning power of mobilized social opinion, much of this struggle can also be read as an effort by the poor to resist the economic and ritual marginalization they now suffer and to insist on the minimal cultural decencies of citizenship in this small community. The perspective adopted amounts to an implicit plea for the value of a "meaning-centered" account of class relations. In the final chapter I try to spell out the implications of the account for broader issues of ideological domination and hegemony.

The fourteen months I spent in Sedaka were filled with the mixture of elation, depression, missteps, and drudgery that any anthropologist will recognize. As I was not a card-carrying anthropologist, the whole experience was entirely new to me. I do not know what I would have done without the very practical lectures on fieldwork sent to me by F. G. Bailey. Even with this wise advice, I was not prepared for the elementary fact that an anthropologist is at work from the moment he opens his eyes in the morning until he closes them at night. In the first few months, perhaps half my trips to the outhouse were for no purpose other than to find a moment of solitude. I found the need for a judicious neutrality—that is, biting my tongue—to be well-advised and, at the same time, an enormous psychological burden. The growth of my own "hidden transcript" (see chapter 7) made me appreciate for the first time the truth of Jean Duvignaud's comment: "For the most part, the village yields itself to the investigator and often he is the one to take refuge in concealment."<sup>3</sup> I also found neighbors who were forgiving of my inevitable mistakes, who were tolerant—to a point—of my curiosity, who overlooked my incompetence and allowed me to work beside them, who had the rare ability to laugh at me and with me at the same time, who had the dignity and courage to draw boundaries, whose sense of sociability included talking literally all night if the talk was animated and it was not harvest season, and whose kindness meant that they adapted better to me than I to them. What my time among them meant for my life and my work, the word gratitude cannot begin to cover.

Despite a determined effort to trim the manuscript, it remains long. The main reason for this is that a certain amount of storytelling seems absolutely essential to convey the texture and conduct of class relations. Since each story has at least two sides, it becomes necessary to allow also for the "Roshomon effect" that social conflict creates. Another reason for including some narrative has to do with the effort, toward the end, to move from a close-to-the-ground study of class relations to a fairly high altitude. These larger considerations require, I think, the flesh and blood of detailed instances to take on substance. An example is not only the most successful way of embodying a generalization, but also has the advantage of always being richer and more complex than the principles that are drawn from it.

3. Jean Duvignaud, *Change at Shebika: Report From a North African Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 217.

Wherever the translation from Malay was not straightforward, or where the Malay itself was of interest, I have included it in the text or footnotes. As I never used a tape recorder, except for formal speeches given by outsiders, I worked from fragmentary notes made while talking or immediately afterward. The result is that the Malay has something of a telegraphic quality, since only the more memorable fragments of many sentences were recoverable. Early in my stay, as well, when the rural Kedah dialect was strange to my ears, quite a few villagers spoke to me in the simpler Malay they might use at the market. A glossary of specific Kedah dialect terms that appear in the text and notes will be found in appendix D.

This book is for a special reason, I suspect, more the product of its subjects than most village studies. When I began research, my idea was to develop my analysis, write the study, and then return to the village to collect the reactions, opinions, and criticisms of villagers to a short oral version of my findings. These reactions would then comprise the final chapter—a kind of “villagers talk back” section or, if you like, “reviews” of the book by those who should know. I did in fact spend the better part of the last two months in Sedaka collecting such opinions from most villagers. Amidst a variety of comments—often reflecting the speaker’s class—were a host of insightful criticisms, corrections, and suggestions of issues I had missed. All of this changed the analysis but presented a problem. Should I subject the reader to the earlier and stupider version of my analysis and only at the end spring the insights the villagers had brought forward? This was my first thought, but as I wrote I found it impossible to write as if I did not know what I now knew, so I gradually smuggled all those insights into my own analysis. The result is to understate the extent to which the villagers of Sedaka were responsible for the analysis as well as raw material of the study and to make what was a complex conversation seem more like a soliloquy.

Finally, I should emphasize that this is, quite self-consciously, a study of local class relations. This means that peasant-state relations, which might easily justify a volume on resistance, are conspicuously absent except as they impinge on local class relations. It means that issues of ethnic conflict or religious movements or protest, which would almost certainly become important in any political crisis, are also largely bracketed. It means that economic origins of the petty class relations examined here, which might easily be traced all the way to the board rooms of New York City and Tokyo, are not analyzed. It means that formal party politics at the provincial or national level is neglected. From one point of view all these omissions are regrettable. From another perspective the effort here is to show how important, rich, and complex local class relations can be and what we can potentially learn from an analysis that is *not* centered on the state, on formal organizations, on open protest, on national issues.

The unseemly length of the acknowledgments that follow is indicative of how much I had to learn and of the patience and generosity of those who taught me.

To the families of "Sedaka," whose names are disguised for obvious reasons, I owe a great personal debt—a debt that is the heavier because more than one would feel their hospitality abused by what I have written. That is, of course, the human dilemma of the professional outsider, and I can only hope that they will find what follows an honest effort, by my own dim lights, to do justice to what I saw and heard.

My institutional affiliation while in Malaysia was with the School of Comparative Social Sciences at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang. I could not have been more fortunate as a guest or scholar. At the School, I want particularly to thank Mansor Marican, Chandra Muzaffar, Mohd Shadli Abdullah, Cheah Boon Kheng, Khoo Kay Jin, Colin Abraham, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor—then Dean—Kamal Salih, and Assistant Dean Amir Hussin Baharuddin for their advice and kindness. Nafisah bte. Mohamed was an exceptional tutor of the Kedah dialect who helped me prepare for the fieldwork. The Centre for Policy Research at USM has conducted much of the finest research on the Muda Scheme in Kedah and, for that matter, on agrarian policy anywhere. Lim Teck Ghee and David Gibbons of the Centre not only helped me plan the research but became valued friends and critics whose efforts are evident throughout the book—even when I decided to go my own way. Thanks are also due Sukur Kasim, Harun Din, Ikmal Said, George Elliston, and, of course, the Director of the Centre, K. J. Ratnam. Officials of the Muda Agricultural Development Authority's headquarters in Teluk Chengai near Alor Setar were unfailingly generous with their time, their statistics, and above all their great experience. One would look long and hard in any development project to find officials whose learning, rigor, and candor would match that of Affifuddin Haji Omar and S. Jegatheesan. Datuk Tamin Yeop, then General Manager of MADA, was also very helpful.

Members of the "invisible college" working and writing on rural Malaysian society whose paths crossed my own contributed enormously to my understanding. They are numerous and I shall undoubtedly overlook a few. Some might well prefer not to be implicated at all. But I should mention Syed Husin Ali, Wan Zawawi Ibrahim, Shaharil Talib, Jomo Sundaram, Wan Hashim, Rosemary Barnard, Aihwa Ong, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, Diana Wong, Donald Nonini, William Roff, Judith and Shuichi Nagata, Lim Mah Hui, Marie-André Couillard, Rodolfe de Koninck, Lorraine Corner, and Akira Takahashi. Two staff members from Universiti Sains who came to Yale for graduate work, Mansor Haji Othman and S. Ahmad Hussein, were important sources of advice and criticism. Finally, I should single out the generosity of Kenzo Horii of the Institute of Developing Economies in Tokyo, who conducted a study of land tenure in Sedaka in 1968 and made the results available to me so that I could establish what a decade of change had meant.

The final manuscript was much changed thanks to the detailed criticism of

# Contents

List of Tables	xii
Preface	xv
1. Small Arms Fire in the Class War	1
Razak	1
Haji "Broom"	13
The Symbolic Balance of Power	22
2. Normal Exploitation, Normal Resistance	28
The Unwritten History of Resistance	28
Resistance as Thought and Symbol	37
The Experience and Consciousness of Human Agents	41
3. The Landscape of Resistance	48
Background: Malaysia and the Paddy Sector	50
Middle Ground: Kedah and the Muda Irrigation Scheme	59
<i>Landownership • Farm Size • Tenure • Mechanization • From Exploitation</i>	
<i>to Marginalization • Income • Poverty • Institutional Access</i>	
4. Sedaka, 1967–1979	86
The Village	86
Rich and Poor	91
Village Composition	100
Land Tenure	100
Changes in Tenancy	103
Changes in Rice Production and Wages	110
Local Institutions and Economic Power	125
<i>The Farmers' Association • The Ruling Party in Sedaka</i>	
5. History according to Winners and Losers	138
Class-ifying	138
Ships Passing—and Signaling—in the Night	141
Two Subjective Class Histories of the Green Revolution	147
Double-cropping and Double Vision	148
From Living Rents to Dead Rents	151
Combine-Harvesters	154
Losing Ground: Access to Paddy Land	164
Rituals of Compassion and Social Control	169
The Remembered Village	178

x • CONTENTS

6. Stretching the Truth: Ideology at Work	184
Ideological Work in Determinate Conditions	184
The Vocabulary of Exploitation	186
Bending the Facts: Stratification and Income	198
Rationalizing Exploitation	204
Ideological Conflict: The Village Gate	212
Ideological Conflict: The Village Improvement Scheme	220
Argument as Resistance	233
7. Beyond the War of Words: Cautious Resistance and Calculated Conformity	241
Obstacles to Open, Collective Resistance	242
The Effort to Stop the Combine-Harvester	248
"Routine" Resistance	255
<i>Trade Unionism without Trade Unions • Imposed Mutuality • Self-         help and/or Enforcement • Prototype Resistance</i>	
"Routine" Repression	274
Routine Compliance and Resistance that Covers Its Tracks	278
Conformity and the Partial Transcript	284
What Is Resistance?	289
8. Hegemony and Consciousness: Everyday Forms of Ideological Struggle	304
The Material Base and Normative Superstructure in Sedaka	305
Rethinking the Concept of Hegemony	314
<i>Penetration • Inevitability, Naturalization, and Justice • Conflict         within Hegemony • Trade Union Consciousness and Revolution •         Who Shatters the Hegemony?</i>	
Appendixes	
A. A Note on Village Population, 1967–1979	351
B. Farm Income Comparisons for Different Tenure and Farm Size Categories: Muda, 1966, 1974, 1979	355
C. Data on Land Tenure Changes, Net Returns, and Political Office	356
D. Glossary of Local Terms	361
E. Translation of Surat Layang	362
Bibliography	364
Index	375
Photographs	<i>following page 162</i>

Maps

1. The Muda Irrigation Scheme Area in Peninsular Malaysia	60
2. Kedah and the Muda Scheme Area	61
3. Kampung Sedaka	88



# Tables

3.1 Size Distribution of Paddy-Land Holdings, Muda Irrigation Scheme, 1975–1976	69
3.2 Size Distribution of Farms, 1966 and 1975–1976	70
3.3 Land Tenure in Muda, 1966 and 1975–1976	71
3.4 Family Income Comparisons for Different Tenure Groups and Farm-Size Categories in Muda, 1966, 1974, 1979	78
3.5 Income Comparisons between Tenure Categories, 1966, 1974, 1979	80
3.6 Net Income of Various Tenure and Farm-Size Categories as Percentage of Rural Poverty-Line Income	82
3.7 Relationship of Distribution of Farm Sizes, Farmers' Association Membership, and Production Credit Recipients	83
4.1 Village Data by Households—Identified by Household Head and Ranked from Poorest to Richest according to Per Capita Annual Net Income	92
4.2 Distribution of Ownership of Paddy Land in Sedaka, 1967–1979	96
4.3 Distribution of Paddy Farm Size in Sedaka, 1967–1979	99
4.4 Frequency Distribution of Farm Holding in Sedaka, 1967–1979	101
4.5 Classification of Tenancy Agreements in Sedaka by Timing of Rental Payment, 1967, 1979	103
4.6 Classification of Tenancy Agreements in Sedaka by Negotiability of Rents, 1967, 1979	104
4.7 Rental Rates for Tenancies Classified by Degree of Kinship between Landlord and Tenant in Sedaka, 1979	106
4.8 Proportion of Total Net Income Derived from Paid Paddy-Field Labor by Households in Sedaka: Main Season, 1977–1978	112
4.9 Reported Losses of Net Household Income in Sedaka due to the Mechanization of Rice Harvesting: Irrigated Season, 1977, Compared with Irrigated Season, 1979	116
4.10 Village Members of Farmers' Association, with Shares Owned, Land Claimed for Loan Purposes, Land Actually Farmed, Political Affiliation, and Income Rank, June 1979	127
4.11 Political Affiliation of Households in Sedaka by Income Level, in Percentages	133