Remembering James C. Scott and His Intellectual Contribution to Burma/Myanmar

Tun Myint

I first met Professor James C. Scott in 2000 at the Burma Studies Conference at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, where I presented my paper analyzing Emanuel Forchhammer's *The Jardine Prize Essay*.[1] The title of my paper was "The Evolution of Burmese Law and Legal Concepts."[2] Jim was in the audience. I introduced myself to him afterwards, thanked him for attending my talk, and we continued our conversation over lunch.

Jim asked me if Burmese law had any continuity over its many different royal kingdoms, then the British colonial administration, and the post-independence governments and regimes since 1948—to speak, so as, about the *evolution* of Burmese law. His question made me think about how Burmese law and legal concepts can be like traffic rules for cars approaching roundabouts and traffic lights. Both these types of rules exist in Burmese social and political history: I told Jim that the roundabout model of rules or laws exist in society but that traffic light models of rules or laws were imposed by kings and governments.[3] I opined that when I spoke of evolution, I referred to both. The latter is what Jim was referring to in asking about the "continuity" of Burmese law. This discussion led to further questions as to how we might think about law and order, and for whom law eventually serves, governments or the governed.

To receive such insightful and critical questioning from Professor James C. Scott, one of my intellectual heroes, was a humbling experience and honor. His humanity, humility, and approachability were infectious. At that time, I was just beginning

[1] Forchhammer, 1885.

[2] Tun Myint, 2005.

[3] Burma has the longest ongoing civil war on the planet, indicating the problem of reconciling the traffic-light model rule of law serving the kings and the state with the roundabout model rule of law that the Burmese public desires to be governed by.

my doctoral studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, and had only read two of his books, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*[4] and *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia.*[5] Other students who got to work with him more during their own studies were very lucky.

Later in our friendship, I asked Jim how he first got interested in Burma, the country and topic that became a lifelong scholarly interest. He told me that to graduate from his undergraduate degree, he had to write a thesis in his senior year. (Rigorous liberal arts colleges in the United States require all students to write a senior's thesis or what other places might call an honors thesis.) Jim said that even in his final semester he was unsure what topic to write about. He went to one of his economics professors, an Indonesia specialist, and asked to volunteer for him as a research assistant and, in return, for the professor to suggest and supervise his still unformed senior's thesis. The professor agreed and assigned Jim to write about Burma's economy. Jim said he was grateful to have a topic by the end of that meeting, but as soon as he got out of the professor's office, he asked himself: "Wait a minute, where's Burma!?"

That thesis and initial encounter with Burma turned into a lifelong personal and professional interest for Jim, as he found in the state-building and state-evasion strategies of peoples in Burma and Southeast Asia a source of several intellectual puzzles to investigate, the latest being his posthumous book on floods and life in and on the Ayeyarwady River.[6] In this understanding, we may say that Jim started his career with Burma and ended it with Burma, writing about Burma's most famous river to inform the world about the views of non-human species and how natural floods are critical to building social and ecological systems.

For Scott, Burma was a source of inspiration for studying the role of the state in civilizations all over the world, and its

[4] Scott, 1998.
[5] Scott, 1976.
[6] Scott, 2025.

troubles in balancing order and freedom. Scott poignantly raised this with his *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*.[7] The puzzle he posed was: How might we understand the fraught dialectical relations between such projects of rule and their agents, on the one hand, and zones of relative autonomy and their inhabitants?

> ... the ubiquity of the encounter between self-governing and state-governed people—variously styled as the raw and the cooked, the backward and the modern, the free and the bound, the people with history and the people without history—provides us with many possibilities for comparative triangulation. We shall take the advantage of these possibilities where we can.[8]

Scott took this advantage many times in his intellectual journey and in so doing has left us a way to evaluate models of states and societies that exercise governance by traffic lights, and the governance by roundabouts to sustain and respect human agency and freedoms in society. For Scott, the roundabout model of governance is more laudable than blindly obeying traffic rules made for and enforced by rule makers. Scott extrapolated on this even outside his home discipline of political science, and his adopted discipline of anthropology, in other diverse scholarly debates. He later marched towards reasoning against the grain about the conduct of early human civilizations and how the state might be counterproductive when one considers the overall prosperity and achievement of freedoms of *homo sapiens*.

In 2009, Jim was invited by Macalester College, Minnesota to give a special lecture at the Macalester Institute for Global Citizenship. I was then teaching at Carleton College in Northfield, about an hour away. Jim chose to give his lecture on globalization and how it serves as a standardization project for North Atlantic

[7] Scott, 2009.
[8] Scott, 2009, p. 3.

hegemony throughout the world. The title was "Vernaculars Cross-Dressed as Universals: Globalization as North Atlantic Hegemony." The essence of the lecture was that globalization is the highest point of the standardization mission of former colonizers to "civilize" peoples at the margins of the world, thereby erasing the vernaculars which are meaningful building blocks of the memories, cultures, and identities of the people at the margins. By so doing, globalizers have standardized nearly all aspects of human artifacts such as language, fashion, food, and culture, purportedly for efficiency.

I was invited by Jim as his guest at that Macalester event. At the dinner afterwards, Jim and I talked about what we could do to help create intellectual debate about the ongoing revolutions of ethnic minorities and the 1988 social uprising in Burma. We discussed the old Journal of the Burma Research Society (JBRS), how it had published independent academic analysis about Burma, and how it had served as a healthy platform for intellectual debate. Precisely because of the critical voice it provided, the JBRS and its society was outlawed by the dictator Ne Win in 1978 and effectively shut down in 1980 by the Burmese Socialist government. Our dinner discussion in 2009 was a precursor to the establishment of the Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship (IJBS), which for the last 15 years has taken steps to revitalize the independent intellectual tradition of Burma's scholars, as exemplified by the earlier contributors to the JBRS. The "independent" in the journal title refers to being independent of external control, influence, and censorship—therefore including writers' own self-censorship.

The first meeting for the journal was held between eleven Burma scholars in 2011. This group became the first IJBS editorial committee. The meeting took place at the Department of Political Science at Yale University under Jim's blessing. Yale University President Richard Levin was providing some funds for Burma-related scholarly activities and Jim allocated some of it to starting the new IJBS. Another part of those funds, I believe, contributed to inviting Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Yale University

under the Chubb Fellowship to give a public lecture on 27 September 2012.

The first issue of IJBS, a special issue on the theme of poverty, was finally published in August 2016. Jim introduced the new journal by saying:

> It is with great pride that we present this first issue of the journal to public intellectuals and scholars of Burma. We hope, with this and the issues to come, to make a significant contribution to the many admirable efforts now underway in Myanmar to create a vibrant, daring, and critical public sphere of the highest standards. The formula that we begin with is designed to foster a long-lasting intellectual community and civil debate around critical themes of central concern to Myanmar's public life and future development.

I hope the readers of this journal benefit from the efforts of its editorial team and contributors to revitalizing vibrant intellectual debate on Burma/Myanmar's social change and political development.

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