



RESEARCH ARTICLE

James C. Scott in Kinshasa, and a response to Jeremiah Arowosegbe

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When the American political scientist James C. Scott passed away in July 2024, tributes praised him as one of the most influential thinkers of his generation.¹ Building on years of ethnographic research in Southeast Asia, his numerous books offered new ways of thinking about subaltern resistance, as well as the mechanisms of state oppression and control. A self-professed anarchist, he organized against the Vietnam War as a junior faculty at the University of Wisconsin in the latter part of the 1960s, and he maintained a forty-six-acre farm for decades while teaching at Yale. While obituaries widely remembered Scott as a figure of integrity, some dissonant voices on social media commented more negatively on his involvement with the CIA as a young man and as a leader in the United States National Student Association (USNSA). The political scientist Karen Puget first brought this episode in Scott's life to light in a book that carefully exposed the ties of the USNSA with US intelligence (Puget 2015). Puget showed how, in the 1950s and 1960s, what was then the most important student organization in the USA allowed itself to be fully infiltrated by the government. The young liberal-minded students at the helm of the organization worked hand in hand with CIA handlers to curb Soviet influence among their peer organizations in Europe, Asia and Africa. For a few years, after graduating from Williams College and before embarking on his doctoral studies at Yale, Scott occupied a prominent role among these young shadow Cold Warriors, first as the USNSA's representative in Paris and later as its vice president in charge of international affairs.

I first became aware of Scott's youth activism while conducting research on the history of the Congolese student movement. As I discovered in archival documents about the USNSA's ties to Congolese students, Scott visited Kinshasa (Léopoldville at the time) in the first week of July 1960. Travelling from his posting in Paris, he arrived in the Congolese capital two days after the proclamation of independence, when the country's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, powerfully denounced the violence

¹ See, for instance, Gabriel (2024: 17).

of Belgian colonialism while dreaming aloud of a future of prosperity, justice and total liberation for the whole of Africa (see Nzongola-Ntalaja 2014). Scott was not particularly drawn to Lumumba, whose vision of radical emancipation was already making some people in Washington nervous (Reid 2023). He came to the Congo to speak with students at Lovanium, the Congo's first university. Scott's goal was to assess the political sensibilities of Congolese students and identify potential allies. In a report following his visit, he happily noted that many students distanced themselves from active politics (see Monaville 2022). He praised their moderation and approvingly commented on the fact that they made fun of politicians like Lumumba, because of their supposed lack of sophistication. Yet, unlike Scott's belief that these young educated Congolese would collectively emerge as a so-called force of moderation, the Congolese student movement ultimately took a turn to the left, with a majority of students embracing anti-imperialist and socialist positions. This turn, in great part, followed the deflagration caused by Lumumba's assassination in January 1961 and events in the so-called Congo crisis in which the CIA had been deeply involved (see Monaville 2019; Reid 2023).

Jeremiah Arowosegbe does not reference Scott in his article on 'African universities and the challenge of postcolonial development' (Arowosegbe 2023). Yet, the anecdote about Scott's visit to Kinshasa might still help articulate a few points in relation to Arowosegbe's intervention. In this significant exposé about the current challenges facing higher education in Nigeria and throughout Africa, Arowosegbe depicts a predicament of aggravated intensity. The author juxtaposes the description of this crisis with a narrative on the evolution of African higher education over the past sixty years. The arc that emerges from this overview posits a continuous decline, starting quickly after a foregone 'golden age' of robust institutional development and serious intellectual progress. While Arowosegbe insists on the stark contrast between the blocked horizon of the present and the period during which African universities could still be viewed as 'globally competitive and locally relevant' (*ibid.*: 610), he also argues that postcolonial African academia was doomed from the beginning. To summarize his view with a rapid formula, universities in the 1960s already faced the same problem they are facing in the 2020s: the problem of the state.

Arowosegbe's demonstration is multilayered. He argues that postcolonial African states inherited a strong legacy of anti-intellectualism from the colonial period. This resulted in a lack of genuine interest in the development of academia, systematic pushbacks against universities' autonomy, repression of academic freedom in the name of state cohesion, neglect, and conscious plans to sabotage the future of the continent's youth. To illustrate the early contentious relationships between postcolonial states and intellectuals, the article points to the appropriation of 'intellectual hegemony' that various postcolonial rulers attempted at the service of shallow state ideologies. Nyerere's Ujamaa is one of the examples of these 'bogus ideological constructs' cited by the author (Arowosegbe 2023: 605). As a scholar, Scott wrote relatively rarely about Africa, but one noticeable exception is in *Seeing Like a State*, where he recasts Nyerere's African socialist policies, and most particularly the villagization project of the early 1970s, as a postcolonial example of the oppressive nature of high modernist state planning (Scott 1998: 223–61). As the historian Priya Lal has convincingly shown, Scott's apprehension of villagization lacked a proper understanding of the historical context that led to its formulation as well as of

Tanzanians' actual experiences with its implementation (Lal 2015: 1–26).² In the same way that Scott's analytical lens in *Seeing Like a State* may have distorted the relationship between Tanzanian peasants and the state, Arowosegbe posits an antagonism between the intellectuals and the political class that at times seems too rigid. The author illustrates this antagonism with recurring references to frictions between 'town and gown'. As a figure of speech, this image is directly expressive. Yet, it implies a structuring opposition between knowledge and power, between the quest for truth and the necessary corrupt working of the state, which misses part of the complex tensions that oversaw the creation and development of African universities in their supposed golden age.

The vignette about Scott in Kinshasa shows how African universities were always highly politicized spaces, in relation to nation building and internationally. Scott's example highlights the significance of Cold War networks and interveners in the history of decolonization and universities in Africa (see notably Gerits 2023; Milford 2023) – a context that is absent from Arowosegbe's historical reconstruction. Beyond the question of the Cold War, the article also shows little interest in the connections between knowledge production and political praxis. The author evokes debates about Marxism as 'one of the remarkable achievements of African universities in the early post-independence period' (Arowosegbe 2023: 594), but without exploring the significance of this body of work for postcolonial African politics. In a different section, the author brings up Kwame Nkrumah's collaboration with George Padmore and W. E. B. Du Bois to illustrate a supposed tendency among African heads of state to neglect intellectuals from their own countries and privilege 'foreign mentors who had little appreciation of African conditions for inspiration and salvation' (*ibid.*: 604). This judgement is at odds with recent assessments of the legacy of Nkrumah over the development of postcolonial intellectual life in Ghana and beyond (Gyamfi 2021). Even more crucially, Nkrumah's elective affinities with US and Caribbean Black luminaries make up for a debatable example of ideological extraversion, given his life-long commitment to Pan-Africanism. Like Nyerere, Nkrumah sought to articulate a path towards emancipation and development in tension with the Cold War context. While students and intellectuals in Ghana and Tanzania clashed at times with their visions, they too worked through the same questions and responded to the same ideological interpellations (Ivaska 2011; Roberts 2021).

'African universities and the challenge of postcolonial development' portrays postcolonial states as either viciously antagonistic or, at best, indifferent to university development, leading to the logical conclusion that privatization might remain the only workable solution to the current impasse. The history of the institution that Scott visited in 1960, then known as Lovanium, today the University of Kinshasa, does not fit well with this broader argument. Contrary to what the author seems to suggest (Arowosegbe 2023: 594), Lovanium was not created as a public university when it opened its doors in 1954. It was instead a private Catholic institution. In 1960, Patrice Lumumba and his minister of education, Pierre Mulele, seriously considered nationalizing Lovanium, a move that may have played a role in the fall of their government just weeks after the Congo's independence (Monaville 2022). In the years

² See also other critical responses in the special issue of the journal *African Studies* dedicated to Scott's book (Bähre and Lecocq 2007).

that followed Lumumba's assassination, Lovanium remained a centre of political radiance. Its students increasingly challenged the continuing dominance of Belgian administrators, while emerging scholars pushed for the decolonization of knowledge across multiple disciplines. The state oscillated in its responses to the students. While officials could be sympathetic to the students' denunciation of the colonial nature of Lovanium, they also worried about the potentially subversive nature of student politics. As I explore in my work, the student movement quickly became the most organized force of opposition after the coup that brought General Mobutu to power in 1965. Arowosegbe writes in a footnote that Mobutu, like other military dictators on the continent, 'held the universities in the lowest esteem' (Arowosegbe 2023: 604). Mobutu believed that university students presented a serious threat to his autocratic project, and he violently repressed their movement. The profound university reform he imposed in 1971 was meant to undermine once and for all the autonomy of student politics. Yet, the same reform reinforced the power of the still emerging class of Congolese academics. It notably involved the nationalization of Lovanium and the creation of a unified national university system, which students had been asking for for years. Ultimately, state funding for higher education did experience a serious decline, at the same time that the number of university students continued to grow exponentially. Yet, by the time of the founding of the National University of Zaire (as the country was renamed in the same year as Lovanium was nationalized), the institution virtually stood as the centre of the state's preoccupations, reaching a scale virtually unmatched nationally, save maybe by the also nationalized Gecamines mining conglomerate.

Mobutu's reform curtailed dissent and imposed tangible limitations on academic freedom. Yet, it was hailed by some Congolese scholars as a significant and radical step towards the protracted decolonization of higher education (see Ndaywel è Nziem 2018). Regardless of one's judgement about its nature, the reform did clearly lead to an era of intellectual productivity relatively unmatched before or since, particularly at the Lubumbashi campus of the national university, where V. Y. Mudimbe served as the dean of the Faculty of Letters throughout the 1970s.³ I am not suggesting that educational policies in Mobutu's Zaire offer a model that could be replicated today, and in the conclusion of my book, I dedicate ample space to the critiques of its legacy for Congolese academia. Instead, what I want to suggest is the blurry frontier between town and gown and the enmeshed relationship between state and university in postcolonial Africa. It is unlikely that cutting through their entanglements will bring about a durable solution to the difficulties of the present. Both had to respond to the challenges of decolonization in the past, and both may today embody its unfinished character.

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