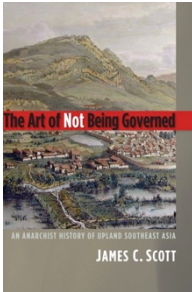


## REVIEW: *THE ART OF NOT BEING GOVERNED*

Reviewed by Andrew Grant (UCLA)



James C Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. xviii+442pp, 2 b/w illustrations, 7 maps, notes, glossary, index. ISBN 9780300152289 (hardcover 35USD), 978-0-300-16917-1 (paper 25USD).

In *The Art of not Being Governed*, James C. Scott frequently asks us to imagine that we are a Southeast Asian variant of Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), who was charged by King Louis XIV to oversee and design the prosperity of the French Kingdom. We are asked to imagine designing the ideal state, with ideal means of managing the population, transporting goods, and accessing crops. What comes to mind is a flat, unbroken plain, crisscrossed with roads and waterways transporting cargo from monocropped fields to the centers of state control. The toiling population is easily located in farmhouses, where they may be recruited for corvée labor or conscripted for military campaigns. Conversely, we are also asked to imagine designing the reverse: spaces that perfectly evade state control. Now we imagine steep, densely forested mountains divided by ravines or swamps, muddy roads inundated with rain, and a population always on the move, taking their agricultural techniques with them, their ethnonyms, religion, and social organization forever confounding those that attempt to record them.

These two opposing visions – the ideal state, and the ideal anti-state – form the basis of the dialectic relationship between lowland state societies and highland hill tribe societies in Southeast Asia. Scott argues that these types of political organizations, including their genesis and interactions with one another, are

generalizable. Throughout the world, wherever states have put people under the duress of forced labor or slavery, heavy taxation, or other forms of exploitation, people have absconded into the hills, swamps, and arid steppes that lay just out of the effective reach of the state. The book provides satisfying and wide-ranging examples to support its thesis and serves both as an inspiration and a toolkit for historians and social scientists interested in populations not fully enrolled in state systems.

Scott frames his study as an exploration of the world region Zomia. Willem van Schendel (2002) proposes Zomia as a heuristic tool for the imagining of regions that are not adequately grasped by the prevailing common sense classifications enshrined in world geography textbooks and university area studies institutes. Thus Zomia has served as a catalyst for many scholars of border regions, quickly inspiring a special journal issue (Clarence-Smith and Michaud 2010), a review symposium (Krasner et al. 2011), and special sessions at the Association for Asian Studies annual conferences. Scott suggests that 'Zomia Studies' can embrace places all around the world where people take refuge from the state. The highlands of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau have topological and ecologic conditions that have made historic occupations of the land difficult for would-be state conquerors. Also, many parts of the highlands where mountain ridges divide arable or grazable land exhibit a high degree of ethnic, linguistic, and religious differentiation; these are the 'shatter zones' that Scott describes. Scholars can ask: what specific conditions have allowed for the continuation of this heterogeneity? What factors technological, political, or otherwise, might lead to a flattening out of difference in the future?

The rest of this review will discuss some horizons this book opens for scholars of peripheral and highland spaces today, followed by a discussion of some shortcomings that detract from the text to a degree. A primary contention of the book is that the alleged progression in social and political organization from tribe to state is but the 'cosmological bluster' that state societies generate. States

generate symbolic structures and civilizational narratives that position their own practices above those of unincorporated 'barbarian' groups at the state margin. The desirability and eminence of the state way of life therefore appears self-evident. In fact, societies at the margins of states have actually cultivated a variety of non-state practices; these include segmentary politics, swidden farming, and flexible oral accounts of group history and identity that resist demands for textual finality and legibility. Rather than viewing these features as primitive relics, Scott argues they are 'secondary adaptations' enabling anti-state societies to remain beyond the reach of valley-based rulers. While few of these insights can be considered *sui generis*,<sup>1</sup> as Scott readily admits in the Preface, his synthesis of these elements is highly readable and energizing. Furthermore, his engagement with the physical constraints of geography, and the possibilities of livelihood, politics, and social organization with which they are associated, is a welcome elixir to the contemporary academic avoidance the nexus of ecology and culture, which stems in part from the fear of invoking the specter of environmental determinism.

Scott frequently repeats that his study is primarily historical, because many of the constraints (for states) and advantages (for anti-state peoples) of geography have been rendered null by technological innovations and the subsequent closing of spatial frontiers. However, Scott also provokes discussions of the near present, using examples from Myanmar. In many parts of the world, this study is more than a historical exercise. Indeed, the last several decades have witnessed Southeast Asian states' efforts to integrate their hill peoples through infrastructure development, enculturation, and even violent conflict. Scott outlines a compelling framework for analyzing the variety of economic, social, and cultural factors that scholars may attend to when studying the various ways that peripheral groups are brought into a state's orbit. For instance, these insights can be applied to the

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the idea of pastoralism as, in part, a response to agricultural problems such as state harassment and difficult terrain has been considered in general by Owen Lattimore (1940) and specifically in the context of the Tibetan highlands by Robert Ekvall (1977).

situation in contemporary China, where the state still attempts to close the periphery with new highways, railroads, and programs to settle pastoral people (Goodman, 2002; Yeh, 2005). As geographical distances close, censuses are taken, standardized languages are taught, and cash cropping replaces more flexible polycropping strategies.

The discussion of anti-state groups' ability to re-organize seemingly foundational aspects of their societies is insightful. Liable to move their homes, present genealogies for any political ends, and break away from leaders that have abused their power, members of anti-state societies cannot be easily categorized. Scott provides amusing examples of colonial bureaucrats befuddled by the impossibility of pinpointing the chief they so desire. Taken together with the discourse of 'cosmological bluster,' Scott provides an avenue for the ongoing historiography and ethnography of frontier groups. Historic records of such ethnic groups often obscure as much as they reveal. The political power behind tributary titles and their associated territories are often illusions. This view provides a strong rebuttal to scholars who search for ethnic origins and historic territories (Perdue, 2005; Tuttle, 2011).

This book's strengths outweigh the weaknesses, which at times can be frustrating. Three weaknesses of the book are: 1) an overemphasis on the state and its negative aspects, 2) the problems of agency and determination, and 3) the limits of the state/anti-state framework. Whereas the attributes and strategies of tribes are described in deeply textured ways, states are presented in a uniformly negative light as hubristic, homogenizing, and stratifying. The Chinese Empire and Shan padi states are reductively presented as part of the same cruel, disease-ridden category. The states presented here have a close affinity with the Western modernist states described in Scott's 1998 book 'Seeing Like a State.' Scott is at pains to acknowledge any positive aspects of states, such as education and infrastructure, which can also generate legitimacy and prestige for states. It is difficult to fathom how states could have ever developed if they are so uniformly bad.

This leads to the problem of agency. Interview excerpts in the book provide proof of hill tribe members' 'choice' to flee from oppressive states. Scott's hill people seem always aware of state threats, always strategizing against them. This fits in well with the political project of the book, teaching and celebrating the methods of apparently self-conscious anarchists. And yet, it is likely that many of these adaptations have been ingrained into these groups and, as in state societies, members are not fully aware of their choices. Indeed, when choices are made out of necessity, to what degree can we celebrate them as 'choices?' Marx's famous axiom is instructive here:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past (Marx et al., 1972:595).

The problem of agency would be less onerous if the determining factors of the attributes of Zomian societies were made clearer. Victor Lieberman (2010:343) has criticized Scott for failing to properly account for the determination of such properties, such as swidden farming practices and orality. Beyond Scott's argument that these adaptations are primarily state-evading choices, Lieberman suggests that a variety of ecological, technical, and political factors could equally account for the circumstances of highland societies. The onus is on Zomian authors to show what determines what.

The third weakness to be discussed here is the state/ anti-state framework, which would benefit from more nuance. Scholars should not allow the totalizing *efforts* of the state to blind them to other processes that shape political and cultural formations. For instance, C. Patterson Giersch (2010) has challenged Scott's division by revealing the connections between state institutions and non-state merchant networks in Kham Tibetan regions during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Giersch reveals that state and non-state actors were neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily working against each other. Today the *de facto* effective sovereignty of states within their borders is being challenged by extra-state and non-state sources (Agnew 2009).

As a result it is crucial to recognize such powerful forces as neo-liberal corporations (Ferguson 2005), transnational NGOs (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), and international markets in contemporary Zomian societies. Indeed, taking these challenges to the Zomian state/ anti-state dichotomy into consideration, it becomes difficult to entertain whether such a firm division could have ever existed.

A final point of criticism that this book has received, if it is a bit extreme, comes from Tom Brass (2012). He warns that Scott's explication of the attributes of Zomian peoples risks re-essentializing their cultures as authentically anti-state. If such ideas were institutionalized, Brass foresees the creation of dual-track governance schemes that permanently bifurcate state and Zomian societies in the name of allowing the latter to follow their more 'natural' trajectories. While it is doubtful that Scott's book will have this effect, this criticism does encourage reflection on what the political aspirations of Zomian peoples today ought to be.

Weaknesses aside, this book provides a compelling and exciting de-centering of conventional narratives about the people at the margins of state societies. Scott offers an excellent synthesis of historical and social science research that will be engaging and useful for scholars in many fields. While the study is focused on Southeast Asia, his model is generalizable enough to travel to difficult topographies around the world.

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