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*The Art of Not Being Governed:
An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*
JAMES C. SCOTT, YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009, 464 PP.
review by Brendan Baylor & Heath Schultz

In James C. Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed*, we find a history of the varied peoples of Zomia, a term for the Southeast Asian highlands stretching from the mountains of the Indian/Burmese border through northern Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and ending in Southwest China. Situating his project, Scott writes, "[t]his is a history of those who got away, and state-making cannot be understood apart from it."¹

Scott's previous book, *Seeing Like A State*, charts how systems of knowledge, ideology, and administrative strategies have a centralizing logic that appeals to "the State" and reinforces state power. In both content and approach, *The Art of Not Being Governed* inverts his previous theorization. Instead of using a wide-ranging theoretical framework to discuss the nation-state in the twentieth century, Scott focuses our attention on resistant social and agricultural practices, the political uses of geography, and religious doctrines that either repel, evade, or prevent state rule. He does so with thoroughly footnoted detail—using examples spanning the pre-World

War II history of Southeast Asia—through which he delivers a nuanced account of both state and non-state peoples in the region:

Zomia is and has been what might be called a “fracture zone” of state-making...It has been peopled for two millennia at least by wave after wave of people in retreat and flight from state cores—from invasion, slave raids, epidemics, and corvée [labour]. There, in this zone of refuge, they joined a hill population located in a geographical setting of such ruggedness and relative isolation that it encouraged the drift of dialects, customs, and identity.²

In documenting the responses to repressive state practices in Asia, Scott does three important things. First, he shows how the conscious and strategic adoption of different subsistence routines and rituals articulated an active rejection of state attempts at appropriation. He contrasts the Buddhist rice paddy-cultivating subjects of valley states with the heterogeneous religious and cultivation practices of the hill peoples. Rice is a crop especially conducive to state confiscation because it is harvested according to a routine schedule and is visible above ground. Encouraging high population densities was another important effect of rice cultivation in the pre-colonial states of Southeast Asia, where kingdoms were not measured by territory but population.

Second, Scott debunks normative narratives of civilization by showing them as necessary constructions of state-making processes:

Once we entertain the possibility that the “barbarians” are not just “there” as a residue but may well have chosen their location, their subsistence practices, and their social structure to maintain their autonomy, the standard civilizational story of social evolution collapses utterly.³

Scott counters the classic “civilization narrative” by establishing material evidence across centuries that non-state peoples have acted consciously and deliberately in relation to states.

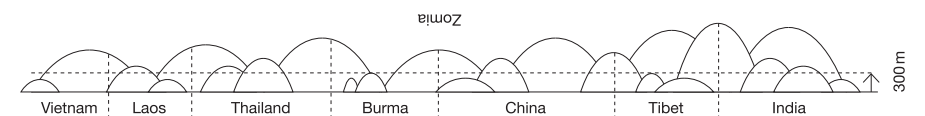
Additionally, he challenges the imperialist notion that the peoples of Zomia are “undeveloped” or “nomadic heathens.”⁴ State and non-state peoples existed in a symbiotic relationship both materially and culturally. Materially, states require frontiers to conquer, tradable goods that can only be found in remote areas, and, for much of history, human labour power in the form of slaves; meanwhile, those outside may need resources only found in more densely populated state spaces. Cultural differences are mobilized both to discourage the flight of subjects from the state core and cast life free of state coercion as “uncivilized” or “barbaric.”

Third, through a study of religion, Scott locates what we might recognize as the desire for political autonomy in the wandering prophets of the hills and their penchant for inciting rebellion. In his words, “[in Europe] virtually all popular struggles for power that today would qualify as ‘revolutionary’ were, before the last quarter of the eighteenth century, generally understood in a religious idiom. Popular mass politics was religion and religion was political.”⁵ Scott helps us to understand this religiously influenced resistance as a logical political tool, despite the use of a religious framework that exists outside the western political lexicon. Borrowing heavily from Weber’s analysis in *The Sociology of Religion*, Scott posits that marginalized peoples adopt religious practices that are conducive to struggle and affirm a desire to escape oppressive power relations. Accordingly, the prophet model increased organizational resilience during rapid cultural shifts and the restructuring of societies in response to changing relations between hill tribes and states.

Finally, a brief note on the subtitle, “An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia,” which is something of a misnomer. Anarchism has its own history, tradition, and discourse, including its appearance in Asian societies, of which Scott does not engage. He uses the term “anarchist” only once or twice in the text without defining what the term has meant historically

or unpacking his specific use of it. It is curious that Scott does not bring the same rigour to his use of the term as he does to the rest of his argument. We think it is important to distinguish between similar but distinct terms like “state-resistant,” “non-state,” and “anti-state”—not to mention “anti-capitalist”—and when Scott suggests that this history is “anarchist,” there is an unaddressed conflation of these terms. Leftist academics frequently misuse the term “anarchism” for various reasons and in various ways. However, in a historical moment when anarchism is an especially relevant political disposition—as a post-Seattle left and the recent Occupy movements suggest—we find Scott’s lack of specificity problematic. While he does not misuse the term *per se*, he adds little to our understanding of a lively political praxis.

At times, Scott’s writing can be tedious, as he has a habit or restating his thesis and recycling examples. Because of this, it is important to remember that his project is one of giving more texture to our understanding of the State and lending historical agency to indigenous and non-state peoples. As an anthropological and historical project, this book offers us a nuanced reading of an especially neglected history; Scott should be credited for his meticulous avoidance of treating Asian state cultures as homogeneous while fetishizing indigenous cultures as “pure” or “natural.” The subtlety of his analysis also extends to the exemplary illustrations of various forms of state-making that are regularly naturalized in political discourse, but that he definitively calls out; this de-naturalizing of the state function is especially important because contemporary references to “the State” in conversations about autonomist practices almost always rely on a Eurocentric model. Beyond the limited scope of European political theory, Scott’s project offers another, vital perspective on the collective artistry of self-determination. ○



- 1 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), x.
- 2 Ibid., 242.
- 3 Ibid., 8.
- 4 Ibid., 98.
- 5 Ibid., 294.

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