

The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia

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Reviewer: Mandy Sadan

There can surely have been few other books in Asian Studies and certainly not in South East Asian Studies in recent years that have been as widely anticipated as James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009). *The Art of Not Being Governed* does not come out of a clear blue sky but represents an extension and adaptation of many ideas with which Scott has worked over the years. Many people first gained some familiarity with the theory underlying this new work through the seminars and keynote lectures Scott gave at intervals over an extended period at elite centres of learning worldwide, often under the rubric 'Why Civilizations Can't Climb Hills'. Although Scott is a political scientist and anthropologist, readers of *Reviews in History* may well be familiar with one or all of his now classic works *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia* (1976), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcript of Subordinate Groups* (1990) and *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). Blending the anthropological with the meta-vision of the political scientist has been a distinctive element of Scott's style and of the interpretative frameworks he likes to build, with the micro-details of particular spaces and times being used to feed into grand schemes of explanation. In this respect, his latest work does not disappoint, although he states that with *The Art of Not Being Governed* he finds himself now also becoming something of an historian.

Where previously Scott's concern was to show the commonalities between peasant societies worldwide, *The Art of Not Being Governed* extends this interconnection to swidden agriculture. In this new book, settled, lowland peasant societies and mobile swidden agriculturalists are to be considered part of the same cyclical econoscape of interaction, with 'the state' as the defining impetus for the development of both 'systems'. In discussing the details of settled and swidden agriculture Scott can also lay claim to authority derived from his work as Director of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale, and a life-long interest in the development of new understandings of marginal and 'illegible' spaces of economic and political life, particularly in non-urban environments. One of the skills demonstrated in this present book is the bringing together in a focused way of a disparate range of technical information about crops, about transportation and so on, and then relating these to an environmental context in a way that is simply unavailable, and largely unimaginable, anywhere else. These early chapters are lively, provocative and informative. Setting aside the issue of whether or not one agrees with the conclusions, Scott raises the bar in this book for thinking about

the highland-lowland binary, which has been so entrenched in the literature on Southeast Asian history. His work ultimately reinforces the binary, rather than challenges it, but what it does achieve is the ‘paradigm shifting’ effect that is acknowledged on the book jacket: now the book has been published, it will be impossible to discuss the uplands of Southeast Asia in the same way again, and some who had never discussed them before will be discussing them for the first time. Many of us who have been working in this field for many years can feel some sense of satisfaction that our rather eclectic range of interests and obscure points of reference are gaining institutional authentication. So, in some ways and for some of us, this shift in focus could be a very good thing, and for academia in general it is good that such books can still be written and that they can provoke a wide debate, especially where that debate centres upon understandings of the relatively unloved subjects of classical, early modern and pre-colonial non-European societies, allowing these subjects to take centre-stage in discussions on global history.

Yet Scott has also long been a controversial figure who is undoubtedly guilty of the sin of over-generalization. Clearly he is not shying away from controversy with this book, and it too is over-generalized. So, beyond the clear contribution that this work makes to revivifying a moribund debate, or developing a new one, there are some limitations as to how we might conceive of this work as ‘A History’. One might wish to see it as a history in the experimentalist vein, in which all historical writing is recognised as being fundamentally fictive, but there is nothing in Scott’s work to suggest he might be engaging with any particular theoretical strand of historical writing. The grandeur of the *longue durée* or the differentiated temporal spheres of Braudel should not be compared with Scott’s vision; nor should the work of Ladurie, who sought also to explain mountain-scape histories. These historians fundamentally worked in innovative ways with conventional historical sources and these sources did a huge amount of the intellectual work in locating these environments within a grand schema. Scott’s work is built up almost entirely from secondary sources, almost entirely in English. The influences he cites are not historical at all but figures from anthropology and political science such as Pierre Clastres, who developed a theory of stateless societies and resistance to states that, like Scott, involves an underplaying of economics in favour of millenarian prophets, and an anarcho-primitivist perspective on the removal of the political constraints of ‘civilisation’.

Most telling, however, is the debt of gratitude he declares for the work of Edmund Leach, most especially his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1), of which Scott states in his preface that ‘There are few books that are “so good to think with.”’ It seems clear throughout *The Art of Not Being Governed* that this, too, is what Scott is aspiring to. However, Leach was an anthropologist who was ‘frequently bored by the facts’ and unashamed in his statement that Chapter VIII of *Political Systems*, titled ‘The Evidence from Kachin History’, was at best ‘in some ways a complete waste of time’ and could be omitted by the reader. Scott’s liberal referencing of *Political Systems of Highland Burma* places Leach’s often contentious interpretations of data to the fore as a critical point of support for his own arguments, especially Leach’s interpretation of the term *gumlao* as an example *par excellence* of strategies of state resistance. Yet, even Leach himself acknowledged that he had essentialized terms such as this and that they had a historical modality with evolutions of meaning in different contexts over time. *Gumlao* was not part of a binary of oppositional choices; even where there might for a time be no ‘chief’ as a result of violent overthrow, a functioning kinship system was always maintained through which socio-economic relations and socio-ritual hierarchies were configured, and such characteristics limit the internal traction and relevance of terms such as ‘egalitarianism’ and ‘anarchism’ as applied from outside models. The term *gumlao* that Leach identified in his reading of 19th-century sources was a product of the extremely volatile situation in regions to the north of the kingdom of Burma, produced by the extension of British power to the west and south and the Taiping and Panthay rebellions to the east; it reflected attempts by all groups caught up in this chaotic time to position themselves favourably in relation to multiple ‘states’ in a complex understanding of regional geopolitics, as much as it was to resist them. Leach’s relational dynamic between ‘the Kachin’ and ‘the Shan’, which Scott also references extensively, was likewise focused towards a narrow interaction of particular, essentialized communities and not towards the complex multi-valent relationships of ‘Kachin’ (and ‘Shan’) communities across a range of dialect and culture groups, with multiple nodes of social, cultural, economic and political orientation spreading lattice-like across what is today northeast India, Tibet, Burma, Yunnan

and northern Thailand. This kind of binary obviously becomes critical if one concentrates attention on places where the Kachin-Shan dynamic exists, just as the state-anti-state binary becomes critical if concentrating on the points at which the state cannot assert its rights to hegemony; it is less powerful as an explanatory tool when looking at the modes of interaction between Kachin sub-groups not determined by their relation with 'Shan', or when trying to understand the internal dynamics of supposedly 'non-state' societies with each other. With Leach, there was undoubtedly a shaping of evidence to fit a theory, and in creating a book with which to think, evidence and theory may be uncomfortable bedfellows.

Certain concepts that have long been associated with Scott, such as 'arts of resistance' and 'non-state space', continue to do a lot of the operational work in this new book. These terms, and the ideas underpinning them, have often been the subject of criticism and non-state space is in particular a phrase that is used widely but rarely receives proper critical definition. Early on in the text, while one may be drawn into the argument by admiration of Scott's intellectual fluidity and verve, terms like 'state' and 'non-state' seem to be bounced around across this historical and geographical (global) landscape in a rather disconcerting fashion for an historian. Scott utilises the term non-state space *a priori* in this current work: non-state spaces exist and therefore we have to explain (now historically) how they came into being. The orientation is, however, from the state outwards rather than taking the spaces that historically have straddled, interconnected, ignored, influenced, utilised *and* resisted the various states with which they are in contact on their own terms, and as a starting point. Neither state nor non-state are historically unchanging concepts, nor might they be considered environmentally produced oppositional norms, particularly in relation to flows of economic interaction locally, regionally and globally. The nature of 'the State' in classical, early modern and colonial contexts varied massively, as do the historical meanings and relevance of the term in China, in Yunnan, in Tibet, in the Princely States in Northeast India and in the state of India, in what was to become Laos and Thailand, in Vietnam, in Islamic polities; but none of this political, economic, societal or cultural variety is brought to the fore by Scott. The State remains a largely undefined term in this book. Although clearly the early polities and classical states of Southeast Asia are very different to colonial states, we are told that the only historical period we should discount from the model he proposes is the period after the Second World War because of the intensification of the process of state enclosure. But why, then, discount this from the frame of reference? The dangers in this approach can already be seen as I have recently read an abstract from one academic working on border issues relating to Burma where they state that they are relieved that through Scott's work that the imperative to give time depth to understanding the rationale of state action against minority ethnic nationalities has been removed; the state can be seen always to act in the same way.

The intellectual framework of this *Anarchist History* seems to coalesce around a 'what if' model: what would happen if you took a convention, inverted it and made the idea run to its (even il)logical endpoint? There are clearly some advantages in doing this when the conventions that are being overturned are themselves born of inaccuracies derived from limited perspectives and unfounded assumptions. Scott is quite right to assert that the bibliographic standards of Southeast Asian history have a gaping hole where knowledge of the uplands should exist. But Scott takes up terms and then seeks to disprove them largely by taking the term as used in a state-oriented context, and turning that on its head in a somewhat tautological fashion, rather than taking as a starting point that such a term might not have a primary relevance within the communities to which he is referring at all. He argues, for example, that the state has a definitional category of 'the primitive,' therefore non-state society can be understood by the fact that it adopts 'the primitive' as an organisational model of opposition. It is possible to conceive of many peoples in many places, especially in the region of what is today Yunnan, where they actually cared very little about 'the state' for much of their history. In these areas one sees incredible complexity in the ethnographic map ranged religiously, ecologically, linguistically, and it is difficult to see 'the state', whatever that might mean, as the primary driving force behind this. When viewed across the landscape that Scott refers to in this book, the key feature appears to be complexity of form which facilitates multiple modes of intersection with trading links, religious structures, political environments and cultures.

Changing ecological niche zones is of far less real significance in this setting than is assumed. The earliest direct ethnographic descriptions that we have of groups cognate with the Kachin come from Assam in the

1820s, and in these the Singpho (a variant pronunciation of Jinghpaw, the largest of the Kachin sub-groups) had settled in the lowland areas. These representations show that they were still practising forms of ancestor worship that are traditionally deemed to be embedded in an intractable category of shifting cultivation. Likewise one may see the urban *dumsa* or spirit priests of Myitkyina in Kachin state today with their gardens packed to overflowing with large offering posts originating in an upland context. Paradoxically, too, it was the groups who were settled in the highest regions of the Kachin mountains that were recruited most eagerly into the British colonial Indian Army: the Lisu, the Ngawchang Lachik, the Gauri and the Nung. War and globalization are powerful forces in unsettling the Scottian environmental paradigm, and these forces existed prior to 1945. Nonetheless, there may be a case for saying that Scott's analysis, which at least ties marginalised communities into a discourse about the state is greatly to be preferred to the more distancing strategies employed by many anthropologists, in the past if less so in the present, where the wider world and the historical forces of globalisation were for a long time ignored.

For some readers, Scott's chapter on orality and illiteracy may be the point at which they are prepared to suspend their own sense of disbelief no longer. Illegibility was a key term in the nature of resistance described previously by Scott in various works, and this idea is taken to its most extreme conclusion in the present book, with a whole chapter on illegibility as the deliberate strategy of language loss: if you want to resist legibility from the state, the best resort is to become literally illegible by dispensing with the written arts. Knowledge of any of the local colloquial and ritual non-national languages of this space are vital if one is to understand the cognitive worlds that are partly constructed by them. Oral tradition, however, is perhaps one of the least successfully studied areas of oral culture within the uplands of South East Asia, whether by anthropologists or historians until recently (and certainly by political scientists). A fundamental difficulty in this has long been the over-reliance in academic representations upon colloquialized renderings of forms that would most commonly have been recited in ritual languages, and in highly controlled ritual contexts. Even when anthropologists have endeavoured to learn the non-national colloquial languages of minority ethnic communities, very few have learned the ritual language as well, even in settings where their primary focus may, in fact, have been ritual. The content of these forms is thus usually analysed from either a structuralist or a folkloric perspective. When considered comparatively across, for example, the Tibeto-Burman speaking region, which is at the heart of 'Zomia', almost invariably these oral rituals share the common trait of reconstructing discourses of legitimacy in the present, but such processual aspects of oral ritual and performance are not elucidated in either of the interpretive models of structuralism or folklore/myth. After spending some years studying both the colloquial and ritual dialects of Jinghpaw, I can honestly say that I have seen no evidence whatsoever for the idea that Jinghpaw was once a literate language that abandoned its literate form. I am not averse to the idea if it can be proven, but the evidence within the ritual language does not seem apparent. Should such a thing ever be proven thus could surely only be achieved through a dense, computational analysis performed by an expert in historical linguistics; I have no idea how. Setting language use and literacy against an historical background, however, it is clear that many Jinghpaw chiefs going back to the earliest records we have of direct contact with colonial forces were literate and used literacy in their relations with neighbouring polities. The earliest evidence we have of Singpho chiefs in Assam demonstrates clearly that some were literate in Assamese and/or Burmese. The question relates more to what one needed literacy for and to ensure that one acquired literacy in ways that made it relevant to that need.

Scott's premise, therefore, is that the uplands of Southeast Asia constitute an ecological niche shatter zone (perhaps compression zone would be more accurate) to which peoples escaping the enclosing impetus of the state could flee. The socio-cultural and political dynamics of the lowlands and the uplands exist, in this view, as a binary of centripetal and centrifugal forces, the one producing systems of centralisation and the other producing segmentary social divisions. Scott's position is that these social systems are deliberately constructed to frustrate the hegemonic, Weberian claims of lowland centralisation: upland cultural and social systems emerged historically out of a conscious effort to resist the lowland state and to absorb the populations that flee from the lowlands to the hills. There is no denying that flight from the lowlands was one of the historical experiences of the interaction of the hills and plains, but Scott encourages us to see it as the defining characteristic that actually produces and sustains this binary itself over an extended historical

time. Yet what are we achieving in reinforcing this primacy of mountains as a political category? Mountains themselves, as with the distinctions between uplands and plains, are also culturally constructed, partly subjective categories. One man's mountain is another man's hill. Scott defines Zomia in this book as being the zone with a 300 metre elevation; Jean Michaud has previously defined the Massif of Southeast Asia (and latterly 'Zomia') as variously produced by elevations of 1000 metres or, more recently, 500 metres. In 2008 I was at a conference in Singapore, which Scott also attended, at which the Japanese anthropologist Noboru Ishikawa discussed notions of a hills-plain binary (which can also be juxtaposed here with another South East Asian convention of up river-down river) in the relatively low-lying area of Sarawak in which he conducted his research. Nowhere did the elevation exceed 80 metres. 'Ah, yes', he said, 'but they have to look up'. It was a nice, slightly absurd, contrast to the geophysical obsessiveness with which some of the Zomia debate has been distorted, useful elements of the 'friction of distance' debates notwithstanding.

I say 'distorted' because it is well to take a closer look at the notion of 'Zomia' itself before looking at Scott's work again. This, as Scott acknowledges, was a term coined by Willem van Schendel of the University of Amsterdam in an article published in 2002 in the journal *Environment and Planning D*, which is probably not prominent on the required reading list of most people reading *Reviews in History*.⁽²⁾ Southeast Asianists had the opportunity to encounter the idea again in 2005, when it was re-printed in a more-easily-googled-edited volume titled *Locating Southeast Asia*. Van Schendel's conceptualisation of Zomia, however, was not a call for a new area of regional studies. The purpose of his article was to raise questions about the bounded-ness of knowledge production, its hierarchies, and the intersection of different scales. It stresses the significance of *borderland studies*, not area studies, and the importance of understanding transnational flows and process geographies. For Van Schendel, these reorientations away from regional studies force us to reconsider global inter-relationships along new dynamics of knowledge production, and successfully integrate the notion of competing scales (local, regional and global) more effectively than can any regional focus alone. Van Schendel develops the areal notion of Zomia as a demonstration of the inherent weaknesses of area studies, not as a call for the valorisation of a new one, which he sees as the least favourable option in comparison with borderland and flow studies, in overcoming these 'geographies of ignorance'. Scott took up many important ideas from this article and the preface and chapter one in his book point towards some of these more penetrating ideas, saying how Zomia is not just an upland space and that it is not just confined to Southeast Asia; lots of qualifications are made in relation to what is about to follow making these pages important for the book as a whole. It would have been preferable, however, to see some of these nuances being explored more thoroughly in the remainder of the text, although this is obviously not Scott's style, nor is it his intention here. Borderlands and process geographies are important tools to work with and are embedded in the historical. Without the intellectual focus of borderlands and process geographies, the temporal and spatial orientation of Scott's book becomes very unclear when set against the other global comparative points of reference he employs, which range across space and time.

The most penetrating chapter in some ways is the one which Scott declares he is most nervous about for fear of being misinterpreted, that on ethnogenesis. In this chapter Scott probably gets the closest we see throughout the text to touching upon the internal dynamics of 'Zomia'. Yet Scott states in his preface that he is concerned about this chapter. In fact, relatively little of what he says in this chapter is particularly novel (as he acknowledges at a general level also in his preface) and anthropologists already work with such paradigms, so his discomfort academically may seem somewhat odd. His concern is political, that he might seem insensitive to the real experience of those who have fought and died in the cause of ethno-nationalist claims against the state. Scott has long placed himself on the side of the marginalised, the oppressed, the victim, the weak against the strong, and it is undermining this which is the concern. Because of its political orientation, the book will be supported by many who, for whatever reason, are seeking an explanation of their own experiences of the vindictive monolith of state building or who oppose the state in whatever form it may take (at least in principal). Scott's book cover, for example, contains a supportive statement from Derek Rasmussen, an Inuit political activist; one would never expect such statements to appear on a new edition of *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Scott wears his radical credentials on his sleeve, and

‘anarchist’ in his title confirms this stance. But do radicalism and ‘anarchism’ have anything to do with the uplands of Southeast Asia? Probably not in these highly socially controlled spaces, even if we might wish to label them ‘egalitarian’.

So, what we have instead of a study of the historical transformation of upland environments over time is a paradigm for ‘thinking’ about the uplands, which is ultimately directed towards the state and about the state and which emphasises the political voice of the author. As with Leach, but taken to new levels of macro-statement, the sweep and scale of the thesis is so broad, and so much nuance and detail is elided or omitted, with difficult, conflicting information being dispensed with as ‘exceptions’ (often considered somewhat bizarrely as points of difference that ‘prove the rule’) that the historical itself becomes a malleable form with no roots in time or place around which knowledge can gravitate and be tested. Time depth becomes a concertina performance in this book with supporting examples for Scott’s fundamental ideas seeming sometimes to be cherry picked from around the globe and across time and space. Scott states assuredly that he thinks he is right. That point has not been demonstrated historically.

The historical question that Scott is attempting to answer, however, is of a different historical order, and may yet prove unanswerable. Scott is working with spaces, places and peoples that do not on the whole have many historical textual sources in their own languages, are at best peripheral and typically invisible in the sources that we do have from neighbouring societies. They are complex and multi-faceted environments, with shifting vectors of interaction between themselves and the multiple systems, both adjacent and distant, with which they are in contact culturally, socially, politically and economically. The historical difficulty goes to a much deeper epistemological level than a mere lip service to ‘oral history’ or ‘oral tradition’ can resolve, or a concern with the micro and the macro or with ‘structure’. The fundamental ways in which we understand historical knowledge, the world of cognition and the senses, and the means by which we penetrate time depth are really what are at stake. Simply flip-flopping conventions is an inadequate response to this deeper historical need. Scott’s method can never penetrate the workings of this upland space in ways that might persuade me that I should consider this work a history rather than a book with which to think. There is nothing wrong with this and it can be an incredibly liberating and useful model to provoke new understandings and directions. Much of how any reader will respond to this work will depend upon their personal inclinations towards theorisation as an end in itself. There is currently something of an efflorescence of new research and new connections within the ‘Zomia’ region (if it is that), and emerging scholars and emerging institutions are an important part of that development. Both Willem Van Schendel and James Scott have been important figures in this process. Exploring the historical in this area is a long term challenge and with Scott’s new book we now have the theory before much of the research has been done, as many spaces in this zone are still difficult to access and, as stated, present serious epistemological challenges to historical enquiry. That theory is only useful if we subject it to a most rigorous form of interrogation lest it distract us from possibly more pertinent questions which we have yet fully to define.

The author has read Mandy Sadan's review, and regards it as well within the realm of fair commentary and critique.

Notes

1. Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (London, 1954). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Willem van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia,' *Development and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002), 647–68. Also in *Locating Southeast Asia: Post-colonial Paradigms and Predicaments*, ed. Paul Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt (Singapore, 2005), 275–307. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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