

Scott, James C.: *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press 2009. ISBN: 978-0-300-15228-9; 464 S.

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With *The Art of Not Being Governed* James C. Scott has written yet another thought-provoking and provocative monograph. Using an idiosyncratic numbering, the author spends 9 ½ chapters to depict Zomia as a region of state-repelling renegades.

„Zomia is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometres containing about one hundred million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety.“ (p. ix)

These are the opening sentences of the book. Zomia's position at the periphery of nine states and at the centre of none as well as the huge cultural and ecological diversity set the scene for a history of Southeast Asia that does not adopt the dominant state-centred homogenizing viewpoint. On the contrary, the author zooms in on manifold communities who deliberately kept the state at arm's length. In an endeavour comparable to Charles Tilly's seminal work on a millennium of state-building in Europe¹, Scott as well refuses any teleological narrative. He tries to make sense of a history that did not unfold as one uninterrupted line of progress, but followed uncertain and contradictory trajectories where people had competing and complementary interests and made choices accordingly.

His central thesis is that over many centuries the peoples of Zomia have made a deliberate and reactive choice for a stateless existence. That the choice is not only deliberate, but also reactive is important here. It entails that statelessness is not, as it is often depicted

in national histories and ethnographies, some kind of primitive way of life, some folkloristic remnant of how our ancestors used to live, but a contemporary response in a direct dialogue with the state.

Scott explains this mutual existence by analyzing the logic of state-making in Southeast Asia and by showing how the features of Zomia are best understood as reactions to and interactions with these emergent states. He understands the logic of the state as one of appropriation. A state wants appropriable or taxable goods and therefore needs a concentration of manpower, preferably growing crops with high yields per surface that are legible, controllable and conservable, and are easily transportable to the centre of power. In the Southeast Asian plains the ideal seems to be wet-rice cultivation. The weak point is population control. Who would deliberately engage in monoculture and the accompanying undiversified diet, with high incidences of crop diseases and epidemics, and to be heavily burdened with taxation and forced labour? In short, who would deliberately want to live in a state? The answer is prosaic: the concentration of manpower was the result of slave raiding, hence hardly deliberate at the outset. Slaves have been the main „cash crop“ in Southeast Asia for many centuries, harvested in the non-state spaces.

Simultaneously population was constantly leaking away, sometimes revolting or fleeing in high numbers. The state would try to limit this loss of manpower in several ways. On the one hand it would use registration and even tattooing of the workforce. On the other hand the introduction of a civilizational discourse that posits stateness as superior and statelessness as backward, served to convince people of their presumed privileged position. It sounds all too familiar.

The flip side of the coin is the state-repelling people. Their characteristics happen to be the complete negation of what we have discussed before. Not the plains that are easy to oversee and to traverse, but the Zomian hills or elsewhere the swamps, the marshes and the sea are their havens. Not a monoculture ripening above ground and at the same time, but

¹ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990-1992*, Oxford 1990.

a diverse set of all-season, fast growing, scattered root crops are preferred. Not a uniform culture that allows easy registration, but fluid identities with oral and adaptable traditions characterize these renegades. Not a strict hierarchy, but more egalitarian political structures prevail. Not fixed residence, but gradations of mobility are the norm. Every feature seems the opposite of „civilization“, which Scott compellingly analyzes as a synonym for fully incorporated, registered and tax paying subjugation to the state.

One further crucial aspect is the interdependence between these two life styles. The valley-people need products from the hills and vice versa. The valley-states need the hills to raid slaves and the hill-people need the valley-states to sell the slave they also raid themselves. The hill-people raid the valley as well – which is just another form of appropriation. Valley-people need the hills to flee to and throughout history hill-people have sometimes chosen to become valley-people themselves. They also need each other in their respective legitimating stories of superiority. Both are a constant defiance of and alternative to the other. Clearly, state-formation and civilization are not one-way processes. State-resistant strategies are not older or primitive but in many ways reactive, hence younger than the state itself. Zomia or other regions like it are regions of asylum, zones of insubordination, areas to raid slaves, in short only meaningful in relation to the surrounding states, not apart from them. Therefore, these areas are not pre-civilized but rather post-civilized, at least in the sense Scott has given to civilization.

Finally, there are two general points of critique I want to raise. Firstly, Scott tends to repeat himself a lot. If every statement would be made only once, the book could easily be reduced by half. Secondly and more importantly, the author does not really establish his case. Like he already did in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*² and in *Seeing Like a State*³, he manages to interpret familiar phenomena in unconventional and controversial ways. His main achievement, however, is much more to perturb received knowledge than to firmly underpin his alternative view. What he brings to the fore sounds con-

vincing and makes sense. It even makes more sense than any one-sided state-centred version, we may have heard before. His premises or conjectures definitely survive the test. Therefore this could be a reliable rendering of history; nothing more, nothing less. But what is more important: the conventional, state-centred ways of looking at the world, its people and its histories can no longer hold true. The evolutionary, civilizational and modernization discourses are unmistakably flawed. At least on the falsifying side he did not leave much doubt. On a meta-level James C. Scott has used the hills of Zomia, who by and large succumbed to state power over the past few decades, as a state-repelling zone one more time.

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²James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Hidden Transcripts, New Haven 1990.

³James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, New Haven 1998.