

**James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.**

How do ordinary people deal with a predatory state? Finding an answer to this question is at the center of James Scott's insightful *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott's analysis focuses on the various groups residing in the hills of Zomia—a mountainous region in South East Asia comprised of parts of Burma, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. His focus on Zomia is driven by the fact that the region is the largest remaining area that has not been integrated into a nation state. Indeed, for over two thousand years, the people living in the highlands of Zomia have lived outside the reach of the lowland government. The standard view of these "hill people" is that they are remnants of the pre-state period and represent a primitive form of living. In contrast, those that have moved into the lowlands and become part of the state system have progressed and become civilized. Although Scott is focused on Zomia, it should be noted that governments and those involved in international development efforts tend to hold a similar view towards those living outside the reach of the state in other settings as well. Indeed, this view underpins the efforts to 'fix' the various institutions (economic, legal, political, and social) in societies around the world in the hope of bringing modernity to people who are viewed as primitive.

The novel contribution of Scott's book is to turn this standard view on its head. In contrast to the view that the people of Zomia are primitive leftovers of the pre-state period, Scott argues that those living in the highlands consciously choose to live outside the reach of the state. Given the possibility of being subject to predatory behaviors by states—including conscription, slavery, excessive taxes, forced labor, and war—people make the deliberate choice to move into the hills as an act of state avoidance.

The book, which consists of nine chapters, explores why the people of Zomia choose to avoid the state and how they go about accomplishing this end. After introducing the reader to Zomia, Scott maps the state space in Southeast Asia, noting that the reach of the state is constrained by geography. Indeed, a central theme throughout the book is that geography is a strategic resource that can be used by ordinary people to avoid the grabbing hand of the state. In the case of Southeast Asia, migration to the mountains not only creates space in the form of distance, but also friction in the form of terrain between the hill people and the state. Scott also details the important role of irrigated rice as an effective means of consolidating political power in the lowlands of Southeast Asia prior to the twentieth century. The underlying logic is that a sustainable state requires concentrated manpower, which in turn requires flat expanses of land that can be used over long periods of time to grow sedentary agriculture.

Several chapters discuss how the mountains of Zomia provide a safe haven for people wishing to avoid state activities in the lowlands. In addition to exploring the various motives for people to move to the hills in the first place, Scott also considers the activities they engage in after migrating. For example, he discusses how hill people developed “escape agriculture” to continue to avoid the state after migration. In contrast to the stationary agriculture in the lowlands (e.g., rice patties), escape agriculture is characterized by its ability to adapt to mountain terrain, its tendency to grow fast and with little direct attention, and its ease of harvesting. Scott also addresses issues of literacy. While it is true that some of those who migrated to the hills are illiterate, Scott also explores the hypothesis that forgoing written records was yet another strategic means of avoiding the state.

Scott also provides a reconsideration of ethnogenesis and argues that standard attempts to identify certain traits (e.g., language) as defining characteristics of groups or identities are not

tractable in the context of Zomia. Instead, social relations in the hills of Southeast Asia are better understood as continually evolving. It is not that groups and identities are absent in the hills; instead, there are no clear demarcations or boundaries that are readily observable by outsiders over long periods of time. Because of this, characteristics and traits are fluid and ever changing. This has obvious implications for state-making, which relies on incorporating people into a group defined by specific characteristics including clear hierarchies and identities. This is difficult to do when people cannot be easily catalogued or categorized.

In providing an alternative to the common view that those living outside the state are uncivilized, Scott's analysis makes the important point that the nation state is not synonymous with order. In contrast, there are numerous instances of predatory states—both within and beyond Southeast Asia—being harbingers of disorder and chaos. Moreover, Scott shows that the variety of relations and structures in the highlands are characterized by widespread order, albeit a different type of order than that which might emerge under a nation state.

An interesting connection can be made here to F.A. Hayek's (1988) contrast between tribal and extended orders. The extended order emerges when individuals embrace cooperation and the resulting division of labor. In regards to Scott's book, an interesting question is whether Hayek's extended order requires some notion of the nation state, or whether the extended order can emerge from order within, and across, smaller groups. The relevant question then becomes understanding which mechanisms facilitate or prevent such order from emerging.

This question leads to, what is in my opinion, the greatness weakness of the book. While Scott indicates that order emerges in the absence of the nation state, his analysis has little to say about the specific mechanisms that facilitate this order. More insight regarding the mechanisms facilitating interaction, cooperation, philanthropy, the emergence and evolution of property, and

dispute resolution would have provided the reader with a more complete picture of how those in the highlands interact in the absence of the state. Peter Boettke (2005) has made the argument that the study of anarchy can be understood as a “progressive research program,” and a growing body of research explores the relevant mechanisms as well as their scope and scale in a variety of settings (see Powell and Stringham 2009 for a review of the literature). Scott’s study could have benefited from similar considerations.

Scott concludes by indicating his belief that the hill people’s strategies for state avoidance are quickly coming to an end. He believes that continued technological improvements will increase the reach of the state, making avoidance more difficult. One could make an alternative prediction that stateless people will continue to sustain as entities separate from the state for a significant period of time. For one, Scott’s prediction overlooks the potential of those acting outside the state to also act entrepreneurially to find new means of state avoidance. Further, given the dysfunction of many weak and failed states, it is unclear if they have the capability to adopt or utilize technologies to effectively bring outsiders under the rule of the state system.

*The Art of Not Being Governed* is an important book precisely because it shatters the common view that those living outside the nation state are primitive and uncivilized. In stark contrast, Scott shows that outsiders can choose to remove themselves from the confines of the predatory state. This insight has implications not only for understanding the highlands of Southeast Asia, but also for how we think about other stateless societies. The efforts to ‘fix’ weak and failed states are ultimately grounded in the idea that civilization and progress require the nation state and that outsiders (foreign governments, IGOs, NGOs, etc.) can build an effective state through a variety of interventions (e.g., foreign aid, military occupation, technical

assistance, etc.). Scott's arguments indicate that some indigenous people may not want to be part of the state apparatus and that it must be recognized that they may have made a conscious choice to be outside the state system.

Related to this point, there is an interesting connection between the thesis of *The Art of Not Being Governed* and Scott's previous book, *Seeing Like a State* (1999). In his earlier book, Scott explored how a variety of state-led social engineering efforts failed because of a lack of practical knowledge. Interventions aimed at aiding what are perceived as primitive societies are examples of social engineering writ large. When the arguments from these two books are combined, they provide critical insights into why so many efforts to aid people around the world have had the opposite effect. The state not only knows very little about how to fix perceived problems, but also has a limited understanding of the preferences and desires of those it seeks to help. When combined, these two arguments should lead to skepticism regarding the ability of government to effectively improve the human condition through planning and intervention. For readers of this journal, the relevant question is whether philanthropy can do better.

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