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Evading the State

Ethnicity in Northeast India through the Lens of James Scott

This article discusses ethnicity and the state in Northeast India from the vantage point of James Scott's influential works, especially his recent book *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott has over the years explored different aspects of peasant or subaltern modes of opposing dominance. The overall insistence is on the resistance and agency of the peasant. In the context of the hill societies that Scott deals with in the book, the entire societal design can be understood to be an act of resistance that aims at keeping the state away. As part of this, ethnic identities are portrayed as extremely fluid and remolded to serve political purposes. Scott's notion of Zomia opens up a new way of thinking about Northeast India. Even so, as I argue, one still ends up thinking of the hills from the perspective of the valley and in so doing we miss aspects of the hill societies and ways of being in the world that cannot be reduced to a state-effect. If one looks more closely at these other aspects, more persistent forms of identification and a sense of belonging might come to the fore. Rather than just trying to escape from the state, people in the hills also hope for another, different, state.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity—identity—India—James Scott—Zomia—resistance—the state

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In this article I will revisit questions concerning personhood and ethnic identity. I say "revisit," as these issues have been with us for the last twenty years or so.[1] And like many of my peers in anthropology, I have spent a considerable part of my academic life pondering why and how nationality and ethnicity matter to people. It seems hard today to say something novel or significant on the subject, yet in dealing with a region like Northeast India these matters are anything but settled. My point of entry here is James C. Scott's recent and remarkable book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Scott takes the reader to a vast hilly landmass with the fictitious name of Zomia, stretching from Vietnam in the east to India's northeast in the west. The region comprises about one hundred million minority people, spanning over nine nation-states, or rather the peripheries of these states, as Zomia indicates hill areas above the altitude of three hundred meters. "Zomias," one could say, translates to "remote highlanders." Scott has borrowed the term from the Dutch historian Willem van Schendel, but applies it in a rather different way.

Only a few years after its publication, Scott's book has gained a presence that is extremely rare for a lengthy (it is over four hundred pages long) scholarly book. The book has been widely reviewed and discussed in both newspapers and scholarly journals and has already been the subject of several conferences.[2] A senior university lecturer in the UK told me that however critical she might be of the book, she loved it; suddenly students have started pouring in to her Southeast Asian history classes. But perhaps more astounding, the book has also found a large audience among the people Scott is writing about, that is, the Zomias themselves. Northeast India presents a case in point. For example, a blogger from Mizoram exclaims that this is "the most interesting book he has ever read."[3] A young government civil servant similarly embraces Scott's book, saying that it makes them see things in a completely new way, pointing out that his ancestors were not "barbaric and superstitious" but knew very well what they were up to.[4] Scott provides a vantage point to challenge the hegemonic nation-state discourse that by and large has painted the region and its inhabitants in negative terms. For scholars, *The Art of Not Being Governed* also transgresses the rigid boundary between South Asian and Southeast Asian studies. Northeast India has tended to fall in between these two academic specializations, being neither a proper part of South Asia nor of Southeast Asia (as it is a part of India; for example, see van Schendel 2002). But with the new ter-

ritorialization of Zomia studies, as suggested by Scott, Northeast India and other hill areas to the east have become a field of study in their own right.[5]

In my book (KARLSSON 2011) I work in a spirit similar to Scott's, trying to reshuffle the geography and think about the northeastern periphery in a new way. The main idea in my book was to look at things from the perspective of the hill peoples themselves and thus, for example, take seriously the commonly expressed feeling of life under siege or the fact that the northeast region was held as an exploited colony. Despite such similarities and my general agreement and appreciation of Scott's project, I nevertheless have serious problems with his take on ethnic identity formation—his "radical constructionist" stance, as it were. Indeed, all identities are socially constructed, but this is not to say that interest, strategy, and politics are all there is when it comes to the formation of ethnic or national identities. As I will argue, Scott misses what one, for the lack of better terms, can call the affective and existential dimensions of identification and belonging. His reductive reading, I believe, stems from the surprising absence of Zomian voices in the text. I at least have not found any person from the region speaking in the book. This seems paradoxical, since Scott's very point is to question state-centric valley narratives and to reinstate the anarchist and freedom-loving highlanders as historical subjects.

In what follows, I will try to substantiate this critique. The article is divided in four parts: I first begin by giving a short account of Scott's main arguments. This might appear redundant as many already are familiar with *The Art of Not Being Governed*, yet I still believe it is of some value in establishing a common ground for the latter discussion. Second, I move on to place the book in relation to Scott's earlier work and then discuss what I take to be the main strengths and weaknesses of the book. Finally, I point to alternate starting points for thinking about ethnicity and belonging in Northeast India.

Nonstate space

Scott is a master of the art of condensing and refining arguments and presenting these in a straightforward and attractive manner. This is the case with his earlier work as well as with *The Art of Not Being Governed*. The central proposition in the book is that Zomia societies and cultures are permeated by the desire to keep the state away—to evade the state. Livelihood choices (shifting cultivation, cropping patterns, and so on), social organization and kinship structure, ideologies and oral culture, as well as flexible ethnic identities and the high altitude location in a rugged and inaccessible terrain can be read as a strategic positioning vis-à-vis the state. Rather than being "givens"—something that is culturally or ecologically determined—all these features or social traits are in SCOTT's account matters of "political choices," that is, state-evading strategies (2009, 32). It is a mistake to think of Zomia societies as isolated, prehistoric, or primordial communities; these are rather people that have fled oppressive states in the valley and have taken refuge in the hills to escape taxation, enslavement, wars, and epidemics. What we

are concerned with is, in other words, a kind effect of the state. Scott emphasizes the constant interactions between hills and valleys, not least in terms of the flow of human beings that has been going on over centuries. When a person moves from the valley to the hills, he or she will usually take up shifting cultivation and in other ways take on a highlander's livelihood, culture, and identity. Scott draws here on Edmund Leach's celebrated (and criticized) work (1954) on Burma, dealing with how people over time move back and forth between a valley/Shan and a hill/Kachin way of being in the world. Scott's sympathies lie with the "self-governing" people in the hills, which he subsequently contrasts with the "state-governed" subjects in the valleys (2009, 3). The Zomias embody a kind of anarchist sensibility that Scott himself purports to. The hills make up a "nonstate space," which again is one of the key concepts developed in the book (2009, 13).

Though you can find nonstate spaces in many parts of the world, Zomia is the largest remaining region with people that have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states. However, during the last fifty years—often in the name of development—there has been a rapid integration of Zomia people, land, and resources. Scott's anarchist history hence celebrates a vanishing or dying culture.

Although *The Art of Not Being Governed* was published in 2009, Scott's ideas have been in circulation for some time, presented in lectures and seminars around the world. I have myself, for example, twice had the opportunity in Uppsala to listen to his talk "Why Civilizations Can't Climb Hills." Several of the key concepts are today part of social scientists' vocabulary. In the case of Northeast India, political scientist Sanjib Baruah (2005; 2007) has, for example, applied Scott's term "nonstate spaces" in a compelling way to make sense of the ongoing political turmoil in the region. Others have followed him, and today it seems hard to think of Northeast India outside of Scott's conceptual framework.

Subaltern resistance

Scott has had a remarkable academic career. He has been at the forefront of research and scholarly debate about peasant societies and agrarian economies during the last three decades. His empirical focus regionally has been on Southeast Asia, but much of his success lies in making his thinking applicable over time and space as well as over disciplinary boundaries. He started off as a political scientist, but over the years has become more of an anthropologist, and he also holds a chair in anthropology at Yale University. At Yale he has been the founder and director of the well-known Agrarian Studies Program. With *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott remarks that he has now also turned into an historian. But as we will see, one could as well say that he has been meddling in history from the very beginning.

His first major book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, was published in 1976. It mainly deals with agrarian life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Vietnam, pointing to a kind of pre-modern subsistence ethic in which all people were entitled to livelihood security.[6] Peasant society was indeed an unequal one, but the elites had certain duties vis-à-vis the poor, small farmers. So even if there

was exploitation, there was also reciprocity between the dominant and the dominated. Colonial rule and capitalist penetration of peasant societies changed this traditional system and put a more volatile one in its place. Rebellions were commonly triggered by violations of the perceived subsistence rights of the peasants.

Almost a decade later, SCOTT's perhaps most well-known book, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), was published. This book is based on two years of fieldwork in a village in Malaysia, focusing on a particular form of peasant resistance through small acts of protest like foot-dragging, pilferage, flight, and obstruction. Despite the unorganized nature of these acts and the fact that those engaged in them commonly seek in a clandestine way to work the system to their individual advantage, the social outcome might nevertheless be massive. In fact, Scott argues, outright rebellions where people confront those in power in public are relatively rare events historically. The everyday forms of resistance are by far the most commonly used weapon of the weak. Some of these ideas were later developed in his next book, *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (1990). Here Scott takes up an argument with Gramsci, or rather with Gramsci's notion of hegemony, pointing out that the slave is indeed aware of his or her exploitation, but to discover such awareness one needs to look beyond the public domain and explore what Scott calls the "hidden transcript." The hidden transcript is what subaltern or oppressed people say among themselves. This could be slaves making jokes about their masters or singing songs and telling stories about their predicament when their masters are not around. Or in more recent times, it could be laborers mocking their superiors on the shop floor when management is not around. Such opposition, however, is not expressed openly and hence is not part of the public transcript.

SCOTT's fourth and arguably next major book, *Seeing Like a State*, was published in 1998. If *Weapons of the Weak* opened the floodgates in terms of work on subaltern resistance in anthropology and related fields of social sciences and the humanities, *Seeing Like a State* similarly triggered a wave of research on the state. The state, according to Scott, cannot handle diversity and hence seeks to impose a simplified and legible grid on society. The key term summing up this modality of power is "state simplifications." Examples of this could be to impose a uniform property regime or to turn impenetrable jungles into ordered monocrop forests, or socialist regimes like Julius Nyerere's Tanzania seeking to transform the countryside by imposing a standard model village where people supposedly would get access to roads, schools, and health facilities. Nyerere's Ujamaa project, as with most other state designs to improve people's lives, failed. It was not attuned to local specificities and the knowledge of those concerned.

To sum up, in Scott's work we get a set of powerful ideas that are being compressed into notions like "moral economy," "everyday forms of resistance," "hidden transcripts," "state simplifications," and most recently, "evading the state," or "nonstate spaces." These notions are often already in the title of Scott's books. They are then developed in a skillful and accessible way that is hard to resist. After reading Scott, you start seeing the world through his categories—resistance here, and state simplifications there. And this, I believe, has to do with his extraordinary

ability to develop ideas with universal applicability. Scott is not afraid of generalizations and makes comparisons shamelessly over time and space. But if the latter could be described as his strength, it clearly comes with certain risks: you lose out on the specificities of particular places.

Belonging in the hills

As with his earlier books, *The Art of Not Being Governed* is a real scholarly treat. It fits well into Scott's larger intellectual project of highlighting the agency of subaltern people and subsequently exposing the power structures holding them back, be it in the form of class, state, or capital. In this book one could say that Scott brings his project to its logical end as we encounter here self-governing people that live a kind of anarchist dream of being outside the reach of the state. Again, even if he is concerned with the history of the Southeast Asian hills, the notion of nonstate spaces could as well be applied to other peripheral areas that are hard to reach and rule over. Scott mentions the Caucasus and the Balkans as similar places. These "zones of refuge" are further characterized by an enormous cultural and lingual complexity, something that again is true for places like Northeast India or the Caucasus (2009, 22).

One of the main advantages of Scott's book is that it turns the usual state-centric thinking on its head. The periphery is placed at the center of attention. In the case of Northeast India one would thus focus on what is there and not, as is usual, on what is missing. This might appear as a simple point, but let me call to mind the more conventional take that looks at the northeast either as a problem of governance or of administration and later development. Think, for example, of Verghese's (1996) book, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, now in its fifth edition. Verghese opens the book saying that, "[H]istory and geography have combined to make the Northeast, homeland to Mongoloid India, a remote frontier." And he continues a few lines below: "Political management in this sensitive region is a most delicate and difficult task" (xi). From a Zomia-perspective, state interference is instead the problem, and subsequently the delicate and difficult task for the people of the northeast is how to avoid such outside management or control. With this move alone, a radically different history unfolds.

But there are also problems. Hills and valleys are mutually constitutive and we need to think of the two together, as Scott rightly argues. Yet as Zomia society and culture are held to be effects of the state, the valley paradoxically comes out as the norm. Had there not been intrusive empires in the valleys, the Zomias would all have chosen the life of sedentary paddy farmers down on the plains. But if one listens to people from the hills they tend to praise high altitude dwellings, pointing to things like a cooler climate, the special vegetation, the crops, and the absence of many of the deadly diseases affecting the plains. Anthropologist Dolly Kikon alerts us to this while discussing the present culinary geography with a sharp division between hill and valley peoples' food preferences. A Naga interlocutor explained to her that food grown in the hills and the plains was distinct as "the air and soil

is different." For him, food from the hills was a necessity, telling her "Everything in the hills tastes so good" (KIKON 2013, 15). Scott's claim that the Zomias have taken to shifting cultivation as a means to avoid tax can be questioned on the basis of the fact that it is a highly effective mode of agriculture in sparsely populated hill terrains. What this suggests is that traits and practices have developed in the hills—from the specificities of the place and the people—rather than as negations or effects of the strategy to evade the state.

The second and related point of criticism concerns the absence of Zomia voices in *The Art of Not Being Governed*. This becomes especially problematic in SCOTT's description of the fluidity or radical flux of ethnic identities in the hills (2009, 242). He is aware of the problem and says in the preface that his radical constructionist understanding of ethnic identity formation should not be taken as a condemnation of those who have fought and died for their respective nations, that is, people like the Karens and Nagas. All identities are constructed, he explains, and this is equally true for established nationalities like Americans or Danish (xii). This is fine in itself, but in the chapter entitled "Ethnogenesis: A Radical Constructionist Case," we are presented with a simplified HOBSBAWM and RANGER (1983) type of invented identities that completely misses out on identity as identification or self-identity. Scott casually refers to vernacular understandings of identity or self-identity, but the overall message is that identity is all about politics and interest. Contrary to this I would hold that the prevalent modern concern with identity and history among people in the margins of states are not only a matter of instrumental manipulation to gain access to land and resources (though of course this is critical), but concerns also what sociologist Stuart HALL (1996) talks about as grounding one self and rediscovering a place from where to speak. Failing to grasp this other dimension of identity, Scott indeed ends up in an awkward position vis-à-vis many of the Zomia movements seeking recognition and rights.[7]

Looking for another state

With the departure of the British, various ideas about establishing separate hill polities have been in circulation in today's Northeast India. The British tried for some time to get the hill people interested in the idea of a Crown Colony, which also comprised parts of what became Burma and Bangladesh. The Naga leaders who already by then had been mobilizing for their own sovereign Naga state dodged the plan, and it was soon dropped altogether (JACOBS 1990, 157–58). But similar schemes later emerged again; for example, in the 1950s the hill people reacted against the Assam government's decision to make Assamese the official state language. The Khasi leader and educationalist Rev. B. M. Pugh (1897–1986) gives an interesting account of this plan in his autobiography:

> So we agitated for the separation from Assam, for a separate State for the hill people. The State Reorganization Commission came into being about this time and with it came an opportunity to put our case before an All-India Commis-

> sion. Unfortunately, the Commission did not see eye to eye with us. We felt then that the Commission did not want to create a State for the hill areas only, as they feared that it would be unlike all other States in India—that it would be a Christian State. Whatever the Commission might have said against the formation of a hill State, we felt that this prejudice was the real reason for not giving us a separate State. I have always been convinced that that was a short-sighted policy of the then Government of India. If a hill State had been created then, there would not have been this present proliferation of mini-States in this region of India. A hill State comprising, as we envisaged then, of the present Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal, Mizoram, and the two districts of Mikir and North Cachar Hills, would have been a much bigger State and a much more viable State than the present individual mini-States. The separatist moves among the tribes themselves, which have plagued the tribal people of these regions since then, would not have developed and their psychological and cultural integration with the rest of India would have been achieved sooner than can be expected now. The only advantage which might accrue to the Centre from the creation of these small States is what comes from the oft-quoted policy of 'divide and rule.'
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> (Pugh 1976, 100–101).

This quote is interesting because it gives voice to a moderate Zomia position, in this case one that accepted the Indian nation and believed in the modernizing project of the new nation-state. In this, Pugh is far from the radical position of the hill leaders who advocated full sovereignty and eventually opted for armed insurgency.

Among the Khasis, Wickliffe Syiem (deputy chief of the Nongstoin State) refused to sign the instrument of accession and hence asserted the right of the native Khasi states to remain independent. He even brought his case to the UN General Assembly in New York but failed to get wider support. All the Khasi states eventually signed the agreement to join India. Wickliffe Syiem could not accept this, fled India, and has since lived in exile in what became Bangladesh (Nongbri 2003, 101–102). Wickliffe Syiem is regarded as a hero among the Khasi militants and other groups who assert a strong Khasi ethnicity.

One could perhaps think of Wickliffe Syiem positioned on one side of the spectrum and B. M. Pugh and his likes on the other. For the latter, rather than evading the Indian state-formation project it seemed a matter of getting one's differences recognized within it. Yet, Pugh is still highly critical of the actions of the Indian leadership. It is due to the unwise actions of the center that exclusivist ethnic politics gained ground among the various hill peoples. And as Pugh suggests, this was perhaps intended to undermine the development of a stronger multiethnic hill polity.

From reading Pugh's autobiography, three key features or strands of belonging surface: being a Khasi, a Christian, and to use Scott's term, a Zomia. These identifications, as suggested, seem compatible with being Indian. I take the latter to hinge on a longing for the state, a modernizing state that is. Pugh, trained as an agricultural scientist in the US, is a stern believer in development and change. For example, he takes great pride in facilitating the building of the controver-

sial Barapani dam, which displaced large numbers of people; this was a scheme that eventually was inaugurated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself. The dam, he says, will facilitate the development of the "most backward," "malaria-ridden," Bhoi area (located in the foothills, neighboring the Assam plains; PUGH 1976, 113).

Pugh's position is not unique. More generally, I would argue, people in Northeast India seem to straddle between a kind of longing for the state and the opposite, that is, a rejection of it. Recall that the Mizo armed uprising took off after the failure of the Indian state to provide aid during the disastrous famine in the years 1958–59. Most insurgent organizations also seek legitimacy by referring to the failure of the Indian state to deliver development (KARLSSON 2011). People hence hope for a state that can provide functional transport, education, health services, and justice. The controversy rather relates to whether one believes the Indian state, the far away center or Delhi, to be interested in or capable of delivering that.

Anthropologist Stef Jansen points out in a recent article that social scientists, notably anthropologists, have a tendency to concentrate on popular resistance against the state. Jansen takes the work of Scott as a case in point. The problem with this then is that one misses the often explicitly-expressed hope for the state by the research subjects themselves. JANSEN builds his argument on his ethnography of postwar Bosnia, pointing to people's desire for "normal lives" and for the incorporation into a "functional state" (2013, 4). He refers to practices aiming for such inclusion as "gridding" (6). Along such lines, I suggest that to understand northeastern social realities one has to engage with gridding and not only grid avoidance. I vividly recall the statement by one of my interlocutors during fieldwork in Meghalaya, saying that people like me (anthropologists and indigenous rights supporters)[8] listen too much to those that talk about self-determination, but that we instead should look at what these people do for the development of the region. She told me further that she was fed up with the militants—"you can't just go on blowing up rail bridges and then complain that the center provide too few train departures to Northeast India."

In Khasi mythology, the original founding sixteen families (or huts) extended to earth through a golden ladder on the hilltop Sohpetbneng. In the beginning of time, people could move between heaven and earth until sin crept in and corrupted them. Peaks continue to be the most sacred places for Khasis. Pugh ends his autobiography by stating that in his old age he has chosen to settle in a location in Shillong from where he can view the horizon all around him and see the four sacred peaks to his east, west, south, and north.

In conclusion, by listening to a person like Pugh we can sense Zomia sensibilities, attachments, and aspirations that cannot be reduced to a negation or the single logic of grid avoidance.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper that was first presented at the symposium "Intercultural Dialogue between Northeast India and Southeast Asia," New Delhi, 17–20 April 2010.

2. See, for example, the special issue of the *Journal of Global History*, "Zomia and Beyond," volume 5, June 2010.

3. See http://understandingsociety.blogspot.jp/2010/10/zomia-reconsidered.html (accessed 7 November 2013).

4. See the online article, "The Dream That Is Zomia," by Haulianlal Guite, http://www.zogam.com/articles/general-articles/1310-the-dream-that-is-zomia.html (accessed 7 November 2013).

5. For a more detailed discussion on the relevance of Scott in Northeast India, see Wouters (2011)

6. While I only deal with four books by Scott, which I take as his "major" ones, he has written others.

7. Scott makes a few passing references to identity as lived experience or as self-identification but does not engage with this in a serious way.

8. This lady knew friends of mine who were engaged in advocacy work to build indigenous peoples' networks in Asia.

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