## Southeast Asia


**James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia***

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. 464 pages, 7 maps, and 2 b/w illustrations. Cloth, $35.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-15228-9.

In a field that studies state-building, James C. Scott has, in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, initiated the filling of a gap in our understanding of mainstream civilizations by writing a history of some who consciously chose not to participate. Given the conventional assumption that these groups were accidentally left behind as civilizations progressed towards modernity, it is the inclusion of this deliberate choice, as well as its detailed and systematic description, that makes this publication so compelling.

The book's focus, a recently "discovered" region of Southeast Asia, is a natural choice for Scott, a scholar of this area. "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 and four provinces of China. There is a substantial academic community that studies states, state-building, state conflict, and innumerable other iterations where anthropomorphized states take center stage as unitary rational actors. Scholars who study those peoples that cross borders and avoid inclusion are a small minority; of this scholarly community, most study a particular group or counterculture in great detail, often ethnographically. What makes *The Art of Not Being Governed* so unique, then, is Scott's thesis that these cultural identities are formed in an interactive context in relation to the mainstream and are thus anything but "left behind." He focuses not on the cultural traits of one group, or a comparison of several groups, but rather places a lens on the process of identity construction, demonstrating the many ways through which these peoples have adapted their cultural practices specifically to avoid inclusion. Instead of innocent bystanders left behind in the progression of civilization, Scott argues that these "hill peoples" are in fact refugees of mainstream "valley" civilization, having conscientiously opted out. They have fled from and evaded various state enterprises, many of which—especially in feudal Southeast Asia—were quite oppressive. Taxes, conscription, outright slavery, and the epidemics that existed in early cities were all actively avoided by adapting complex but flexible cultural identities that made forced inclusion difficult or entirely impossible.

As Scott systematically explains, and each chapter concludes, there is no question that the identities constructed are done so with purpose. There is no passivity in the lives of these cultural refugees; identity is either an aid or hindrance to the goal. He includes many characteristics of culture with varying degrees of influence on what may be called a "cultural identity." Rice, for example, was easy to see and easy

to seize; thus it was exchanged for maize, cassava, and a host of other root vegetables that could be planted, left behind, and harvested when the threat had passed or as needed, plant by plant. Though a historic staple crop, the abandonment of rice farming had an arguably less severe impact on cultural identity than, to choose another of Scott's examples, the abandonment of a written language.

Cultures relying entirely on oral histories are inherently more flexible that those written, allowing the cultural identity to which they belong to be just as flexible, creating what Scott refers to as "pliable ethnic identities." Many legends of lost literacy such as stories of treachery and of carelessness exist within individual Zomia cultures. While Scott points out the possible truths behind these legends, his emphasis is on the advantages of "orality," which he chose in preference to "illiteracy," to "call attention to orality as a different and potentially positive medium of cultural life as opposed to a mere deficiency" (221). The lack of a text, and the orthodoxy that often comes with it, allow room for interpretive maneuvering in response to current challenges from valley cultures.

Scott's concept of friction is one clear example of his own trailblazing; "friction" itself is suggestive of tension, conflict, and resistance, of which he details many varieties, terrain and distance being potentially the most typical. Participation in valley society, which included taxation and often conscription, was physically avoided by placing miles between the "state center," as young states often had little power of enforcement outside their cores. Fleeing into the steep and densely forested mountains was a common reaction to an overly oppressive governance; hill tribes could disperse into progressively smaller groups, sometimes even down to individual families, if pursued. Thus the choice to place oneself at odds with the state—joining the hill people—is a reactive choice: farmers, laborers, and tradesmen saying "enough is enough" and taking a decidedly anti-state stance in their departure. The subtitle of this book, *An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia,* is no accident. Scott's interpretation gives clear agency to the many peoples avoiding inclusion in the state apparatus through what is essentially self-marginalization.

Scott places agency in identity construction as the central focus of *The Art of Not Being Governed,* a worthwhile addition given the extensive and historical representation of these regions and the peoples who occupy them as "left behind, forgotten, and pre-literate." It is the concept of agency that sets this piece apart from the many works, ethnographic and otherwise, that describe the identity of some "backwards, traditional" tribe in country X. Broadly speaking, agency can be understood as the capacity to make choices and impose those choices on the world, something the people of Zomia unquestionably do in their rejection of a valley existence. A more restricted understanding of agency, however, suggests the capacity of individuals or groups to act independently in their implementation of choices, hampered by a variety of structures. Scott describes in great detail how the various methods and strategies of avoidance allowed an autonomy from the state, a crucial (and previously missing) piece of the puzzle in understanding state formation and society in general: "This theme of social shape-shifting is articulated in accounts of nomadic and foraging peoples. The amorphous nature of Mongolian social structure and its lack of 'nerve centers' were credited by Owen Lattimore as preventing

Chinese colonization" (210). In their deliberate assessment of state-based civilizations, are these people not dooming themselves to marginality? "Shape-shifting" has made possible the continued existence of these mountain cultures, but only so much as the cultural characteristics can be fluid. Those that are not must be abandoned for the purposes of survival.

Ultimately Scott is successful in widening the intellectual lens of the formation of civilizations to include not just the examination of state-building but its obverse—it's active avoidance. As a work detailing identity construction it is brilliant, illuminating both the reasoning and the methods used to remain free of state control. As an argument for the agency of these peoples, however, it is less convincing. Faced with the choice between maintaining a written language and survival, many of these cultures chose the latter. But is this agency? Is the continual adjustment of language, location, food, and lifestyle a demonstration of real choice? "Pliable ethnic identities" allowed self-preservation, yes, but at the expense of a unique cultural identity. Entire peoples were refugees, adopting fluid identities that can be changed as often as they can physically relocate and switch staple foods. Scott utilizes the term "refugee" himself, a confusing usage given that "refugee" connotes exile, a fugitive condition, and persecution. To be sure, survival by means of these avoidance mechanisms may be better than the alternative, but I suggest tempering our celebration of an essentially forced choice to abandon many of the things that define us. Not everyone wanted to be part of the valley civilization and the development that came with it, and this is a critical step that Scott emphasizes in this beautifully written and fascinating piece. However, as "opting out" entailed *giving up* an identity it seems more unfortunate than empowering.

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