

## **UC Merced**

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

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Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott develops his theory that state-averse peoples use mountainous terrain and sheer altitude to avoid incorporation into valley regimes. The central focus is on Zomia, the largest extant autonomous region, where “location at the margins, physical mobility, their flexible social structure ... are better seen on a long view as adaptations designed to evade both state capture and state formation”(p. 9). Scott’s exploration of Zomia reveals the glaring flaws of centralized government, noting that the utility of anarchy in hill society is not barbarism, but strategic nonalignment to the interest of the nation-state.

Spanning eight southeastern countries, numerous religions, and hundreds of languages, Zomia is a collection of diverse peoples and cultures bound by their geographical locality and desire to avoid incorporation into the valley states. Refusing to adopt the customs of valley states affirms independence, and their “agricultural and social practices ... can best be understood as techniques to make good this evasion, while maintaining the economic advantages of the lowland connection”(p. 25).

Chapter two concerns state appropriation of the land politically and the ‘friction’ that inhibits central administration. The state’s ability to project power was enhanced by wet-rice cultivation; concentrating manpower and food production meant the state exerted tremendous power over citizens, making Zomia a refuge for those avoiding state control.

Chapter three explores the relationship between arable land and manpower, noting that state power rested more upon control of labor than territory in Southeast Asia. The

mixed farming practices of hill peoples, mainly swidden agriculture, enhanced their liberty and mobility while subverting coercive taxation by the state.

Chapter four covers interaction between the state and ungoverned frontier, where Scott argues that certain markers like language and ethnicity define the shifting boundary. Chinese definitions of civilization contrast with barbarism to inform this concept, denoting that city life as natural meant “[altitude] could then be coded primitive”(p.103) and civilizing efforts were progressive.

In chapter five the use of Zomia as a refuge from the valley states is explored and correlated with similar instances outside Southeast Asia; in the New World and Mesopotamia, native peoples fled fertile farmland for the safety of shatter zones.

Chapter six focuses on what Scott terms ‘escape agriculture’, a decentralized and highly malleable farming regime that allowed hill people to avoid confrontation with valley states. Deemed primitive and inefficient, escape agriculture was an effective form of resistance to state control. A half chapter, 6 1/2, discusses the oral tradition of Zomia as a response to the writing-literacy of valley states and the usefulness of ‘Lisu forgetting’ in refusing to cooperate with traditional historical narratives. Both are efforts by hill peoples to resist cultural conformity with the valleys, which disengage on the level of communication and memory.

Chapter seven discusses ethnogenesis, described as the fluid nature of ethnicities and identities which impeded efforts to compartmentalize and politically arrange hill peoples.

Chapter eight explores the litany of rebellions, or perpetual resistance, to political domination by various Zomians. Prophetic movements operate within Zomia’s diffused social climate, creating what Scott terms “the ultimate escape social

structure”(p. 311). The Conclusion questions the longevity of the various anarchic traditions in the face of modernization and friction-eliminating technologies.

Scott effectively promotes the existence and success of Zomia as a socio-political geographic entity, confirming the utility of shatter zones against the oppression of valley states. By rejecting the nation state Zomia created a new social organization based on shared cultural values and ecology, unilaterally repulsing efforts of enclosure and taxation.

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