

Zomia, Land Without State

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For two thousand years, according to James Scott, the mountains of Zomia were a place of refuge for the people of Southeast Asia. For the author, this region, as a centre of resistance to the state, holds up a mirror to our destructive and self-confident civilisation. A fascinating and intriguing anarchist history.

Reviewed: James C. Scott, *Zomia, ou l'art de ne pas être gouverné*, Paris, Seuil, translated by Nicolas Guilhot, Frédéric Joly, Olivier Ruchet, 2013 [2009], €27. [*The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, 2009].

“What the Savages show us is that the constant effort to prevent chiefs from being chiefs is a refusal of unification, it is the process of plotting against Unity, against the State. The history of people who have a history is, we are told, the history of class struggle. The history of people without a history is, we might say with at least just as much truth, the history of their struggle against the state.”

Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'État. Recherches d'anthropologie politique*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1974, p. 186¹.

Ever since his initial work on the moral economy of Burmese and Vietnamese peasants in the 1970s, political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott, who was born in 1936 and now teaches at Yale, has focussed on the analysis of forms of resistance used by the weak, by colonised people, by people who are dismissed, to contest the domination of the state. As an acknowledged anarchist, who is as comfortable pondering the transformation of Southeast Asian agrarian societies as he is raising chickens on his Connecticut farm², Scott has tried, throughout his unique and brilliant body of work, to recapture the autonomy and dignity of the underclass in its struggle against the predatory aims of the state, be it pre-colonial, colonial or postcolonial³.

With his new book, published in English in 2009 and recently translated into French by the Seuil publishing house, Scott further develops a certain number of the central themes of his work (escape, dissimulation, the unsaid as privileged forms of resistance to domination), within a new spatial framework. His previous works either relied on detailed, localised field work (*Weapons of the Weak*, published in 1985 and not yet translated into

¹ The second half of this quote is used as an epigraph in the book that we are reviewing here.

² See the endearing portrait written about him in the *New York Times* in December 2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/books/james-c-scott-farmer-and-scholar-of-anarchism.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

³ The reader will find a list of his main works at the end of this review.

French, was the result of Scott and his family's two year stay in a Malaysian village at the end of the 1970s), or on vast comparative studies in which the author would sail across continents and centuries to illustrate his theses (as in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, the first of his books to be translated into French in 2007, or *Seeing Like A State*, published in 1998). In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott chooses to focus on a transnational space, which is at once vague and circumscribed, and to study it over a period of almost two thousand years. We should point out immediately that there is no point in trying to find Zomia on a map. This recently-coined term means "hill people" in several Tibeto-Burman languages⁴. A Dutch historian, Willem van Schendel, suggested in 2002 that it could be used to refer to the highlands of Southeast Asia, a vast region measuring 2.5 million square kilometres, inhabited by 100 million people and straddling at least six states in the area, from Burma to China, through Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. While these highlands are a real mosaic of peoples, they nevertheless have in common, according to James Scott, that they are inhabited by groups that, throughout history, have never stopped taking refuge there to escape from the hold of the state.

Zomia is thus not so much a geographic reality as a political construct, the place *par excellence* where domination is rejected. Inspired by Fernand Braudel and his famous study, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen au temps de Philippe II* (1949), Scott invites us to go beyond the existence of state boundaries to better understand the coherence of a space that had until now remained unseen, or was at least thought of in a fragmented manner, in terms of the relationship of its various parts to the various nation states in the region. Far from being a conservatory of archaic practices, outside of history and civilisation, Zomia is fundamentally a "state effect", the product of conscious strategies on behalf of its populations to resist the oppression of kingdoms and colonial powers. The tribes which make it up (Hmong, Miao, Wa, Tai, Karènes, Akha, etc.) are multiple and fluid, and they are key players in a two-thousand-year history of rejection of the state and of its manifestations, be they taxes, conscriptions, censuses or land registers, all technologies which arise out of the state's concern to make societies more understandable, measurable and governable – a thesis which Scott has developed at length in *Seeing Like A State*. He thus, in this book, brings together the two inseparable strands of his thought: the predatory appetite of the state, its domination and its exactions; and the numerous ways through which the "weak" contest its authority, using strategies of dissimulation, of escape or of avoidance, rather than through direct, frontal opposition.

A Land of Fugitives

For Scott, all of the states which have existed in the region for the past two thousand years, be it the first Chinese dynasties through to those of the Ming and Qing, and of the Burmese and Thai, or those of the British, French or Dutch colonists, or the nation-states that arose out of decolonisation, have shared the common obsession of wanting to fix populations in the valleys to put them to work. This necessity is supposedly the result of the imbalance between an abundance of land and the scarcity of labour, which is a very ancient problem in South-East Asia. States there have always had a glut of real estate and coercive power, but lack plentiful manual labour. Rice growing, which requires a large labour force and a dense population, has the advantage of concentrating populations, thus facilitating military recruitment and the levying of taxes. In order to appropriate the peasants' labour force for

⁴ We should point out that the title chosen for the French edition stresses the spatialised aspect of Scott's argument, whereas the title of the English edition does not explicitly mention Zomia.

themselves, states have resorted to violence, to raids, to slavery, and even, in the case of the Thai and Burmese states, to the systematic tattooing of taxpayers.

But their controlling ambitions have been thwarted by what Scott, who is aware of the influence of topography on state construction processes, calls the “friction of terrain”. In this region where valleys and hills alternate, distance is measured not so much in kilometres as in units of time: how long does it take to get to this or that area? The state is defined not as an entity that controls a clearly-delineated territory, but rather as a force field, an area of influence with vague and moving contours, limited just as much by the competition of neighbouring states as by the accidents of its geography. It is thus a mistake to rely on estimates of distances “as the crow flies” if we want to appreciate the capacity of state power to project itself: a hilly area located a few kilometres away from a power centre can have much greater autonomy than a huge valley that is several hundred kilometres away but connected to the centre by a river. In other words, the power of the state does not spread out in a linear and continuous manner; it moulds itself to uneven ground, circumvents mountains, dives into valleys, flourishes in the plains. Only a three-dimensional representation can bring to light the terracing of forms of social organisation in South-East Asia: in between 0 and 300 metres, the world of the rice paddy state, of taxes, of sovereignty and sedentary life; above 300 metres, and sometimes up to 4,000 metres, that of tribes, of ethnicity, of autonomy and nomadic life⁵.

You thus might say that Zomia floats above the valleys, out of the way of border posts and national identities. It is thus an area of refuge, a place where the power of the state is not exercised, or at least very little. It is not, however, an area that has no relationship with the state. Everything, or almost everything there is determined by the neighbouring presence of centralising powers. The inhabitants of Zomia have often traded with the states of the valleys, providing them in particular with precious raw materials from the forests. Populations have never ceased to circulate from the valleys to the hills, and vice versa, depending on the political environment. But the most important fact, for Scott, is that the societies of the hills are like the mirror image of state-based societies. In order to better understand the state, he invites us to travel to its opposite, where populations have tried to shield themselves against it.

In Praise of Nomadic Life

The tribes of Zomia, which are incredibly heterogeneous, have deployed one strategy after another to circumvent the state and escape from its power. Everything which is conventionally ascribed to barbarism, to an incapacity to integrate into civilisation – as defined by a sedentary lifestyle, writing, the distinction between state and society, the fixity of identities, etc. – is, for Scott, the result of conscious and deliberate choices made by the hill peoples to avoid the state, since they cannot defy or overthrow it. Zomia, the author points out, is probably not unique in history. He draws several parallels with other floating populations, such as the Cossacks, the Berbers, Gypsies, fugitive slaves or American Indians who took refuge in the forests to escape forced labour in the Catholic *reducciones*.

⁵ Quite rightly, and so as not to give his readers a false impression of the role altitude has to play in these structures, Scott notes that there is nothing universal about this pattern. In the Andes, for example, the relationship between altitude and power is reversed: states have a hold on the high plateaus, whereas the humid lowlands elude their control.

The first of these strategies relies on adopting an itinerant lifestyle. For Scott, slash-and-burn agriculture and picking are not at all archaic, but rather arise out of a desire to oppose mobility to all the efforts made by the state to delimit properties, privatise them and record them in land registries. What can tax authorities levy if agriculture is not concentrated? Likewise, the choice of certain varieties of plants or tubers, such as sweet potato or cassava, could be explained by their intrinsic qualities (rapid growth, low labour intensity, the fact that the harvests are buried and scattered), which are well suited to nomadic practices. It is therefore not surprising, in the author's view, that this "fugitive agriculture" should be criticised for its negative effects on the environment or on soil erosion: here again, we are dealing with a reflex of valley administrators, who are seeking to discredit practices and populations which they have no hold upon.

More fundamentally, Scott considers that the lack of writing, which is traditionally associated with an inability to enter into history, is actually a deliberate choice made by these tribes, which favour oral culture as opposed to the scriptural logics of states. He reminds us that hill peoples, in this respect, are no different from the majority of the inhabitants of the valleys, who were massively illiterate until the 20th century. In several tribes, for example in the Akha or the Wa, legends recount how writing, which used to be known, was lost or stolen on the occasion of an escape or of a disintegration of the group. Without writing, the hill peoples are also without history, which supposedly protects them from the scourge of identity and fixity. The stories that they tell each other and the genealogies that they knock together, in contrast, supposedly allow them to maintain a pliant and flexible relationship to culture, and to easily adapt their tales to any new circumstances and political alliances.

This series of interpretative reversals ultimately leads Scott to argue for "radical constructivism" in terms of the analysis of ethnic identities. Tribes should no longer be viewed as primitive entities, which came into being before the state and civilisation, but rather as strategic constructions, forms of representation which hill peoples develop according to their relationship with the states of the lowlands. The author is here taking very direct inspiration from the anthropologist Pierre Clastres, reworking the latter's ideas about the capacity of Native American societies to organise in such a way as to ensure that no form of political power is able to emancipate and externalise itself. By not having any appointed chiefs, the tribes supposedly protect themselves from the temptation which some of their members might feel to act as go-betweens and negotiate with the predatory states. This, according to Scott, is what explains the ethnic mosaic of Zomia. By breaking up and scattering themselves ad infinitum, he claims that the tribes deliberately produced this sort of "ethnographic chaos", aimed at thwarting the classifying desires of the valley administrators: "The creation of tribes and ethnicities in this sense might be termed the standard mode of claim-making by stateless people who interact with states" (p. 347). Conversely, it is through the favourable welcome given to millenarian aspirations and all types of prophets that the valley people supposedly expressed their cohesion, in particular during the revolts aimed at neighbouring states, such as those that took place in China in the 1850s and 1860s (Taiping and Miao revolts).

We Are All Zomians?

However, the celebration of hill peoples' skills of adaptation and cunning which James Scott encourages us to take part in is a funeral eulogy. From the first pages of the book, the author warns us that Zomia is no more, or at least not in the political form that he is describing. Since the mid-20th century, these mountainous areas have been incorporated into

nation-states, which now rely on distance-cancelling technologies that are strong enough to free themselves from the “friction of terrain”. A predatory logic has extended to these regions which had managed to escape it for so long, reducing Zomians to the state of mere Zombies⁶, minorities offered up to the gaze of tourists who are dazzled by this wealth of beautiful colours and quaint dialects. Zomia has discovered civilisation at last, some will say; Scott concludes, with a hint of bitterness, that it has mainly learnt the hard way what subjection to the state is really like.

Zomia is dead, but has it ever really existed? The question might seem absurd once you have finished reading these dense and fascinating five hundred pages. The real strength of Scott’s book, aside from its ode to the rebellious inventiveness of hill peoples, lies in the intellectual and political acknowledgement which he gives to a region that has slipped underneath the radars of history. One could imagine that, in future, Zomian studies might find their place in history, anthropology or sociology departments, as a new unit of transnational analysis. The fact remains that the term Zomia itself was only coined just under a decade ago, and that it is not unanimously endorsed by specialists of the region. It seems that the word was never used by local populations, which makes it fairly unlikely that they were ever aware of sharing a common experience of resistance to the state⁷. Scholars also do not agree on the extent of this area, which is unstable by definition. Scott focuses on the Eastern part of Zomia, while van Schendel extends its application much further to the North and West, right to the edges of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Anthropologists who are aware of the realities Scott describes, such as Canadian Jean Michaud, prefer to talk of the “Southeast Asian Massif”, sticking to a topographical term that is more politically neutral⁸. Still, Scott’s spatialised approach has the benefit of jostling traditional divisions and of challenging established borders.

But isn’t the dividing line between Zomia and the valleys, between tribes and states, between the enchanted world of diversity and the nightmare of homogeneity, too simple and beautiful to be true? Isn’t Scott falling for the giddy attraction of schematic thought by wanting to prove at all costs that the hill peoples have a capacity to act and a political autonomy? This criticism, while it is probably well-founded, risks missing its target, because Scott’s aim is elsewhere: if you want to shake up people’s certainties and shatter the hegemony of the nation-state, there is nothing like a clear, strong idea, even if it cannot always be right or nuanced, as he claims from the introduction to the book. With its monumental erudition, *The Art of Not Being Governed* thus presents the critical reader with a formidable dilemma, especially if this reader is not at all a specialist of the region: the options are either to underline the binary and systematic tendencies of its argumentation, or to quibble over details, by hunting down the mistakes which such a work of synthesis will inevitably include⁹. Let us try, nevertheless, to put forward two points of discussion, in relation to which Scott’s argumentation is as fascinating as it is intriguing.

⁶ Bernard Formoso, “Zomian or Zombies ? What future exists for the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif?”, *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, no. 2, July 2010, p. 313-332.

⁷ Tom Brass, “Scott’s “Zomia”, or a populist post-modern history of nowhere”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 42, no. 1, p. 123-133.

⁸ Jean Michaud, “Editorial. Zomia and beyond”, *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, no. 2, July 2010, p. 187-214.

⁹ Some mistakes or omissions, which have been spotted by specialists of the region, are nevertheless problematic in terms of the author’s overall argument. Victor Lieberman, in the article cited below, refers to several, including the fact that there are, in reality, very few testimonies which allow us to document the existence of migrations as escapes from the state, which Scott nevertheless views as being generalised. Likewise, the figures he gives in reference to the literacy of valley societies around 1800 are apparently markedly underestimated,

A first question is thrown up by Scott's tendency to interpret everything from a political angle. From the culture of sweet potatoes to "alliteracy" (a term which the author uses instead of illiteracy in order to underline its intentional character), from kinship structures to the refusal of writing, from migrations to picking, everything arises out of his analysis of conscious and intentional choices made by the populations, whose main motivation, if not the only one, is to elude the state. Everything is political, therefore, at the risk of minimising anything that might be influenced, at least partially or in a complementary manner, by other mechanisms of a climatic, geological, or even sociological nature. In Scott's view, Zomia becomes a collective operator, endowed with reason and will, able to modulate the forms of its organisation in order to frustrate the predatory structures of the state. It seems at times to have the coherence and wisdom of a free and rational being, and at times to enjoy the malleability and adaptability of a living organism, like when the author appropriates the metaphor of the viscous and elusive "jellyfish" to describe the development of the tribes. The weight of heritage and of institutions imposes very few constraints on agents who are constantly constructing and reconstructing their modes of organisation in order to preserve their autonomy. And yet a comment taken from the same work by Pierre Clastres which Scott is so influenced by warns against the risk of diluting the political if you look for it everywhere:

From this point on, everything falls into the field of the political, all the subgroups and units (kinship groups, age groups, production units, etc.) which make up a society are invested, on all subjects and off subject, with political meaning, which ends up encompassing everything that is social and thus losing its specificity. For if the political is everywhere, it is nowhere.¹⁰

Everything is political, and everything is reactive: each transformation of the tribes is viewed as a reaction to the action of the state, with which they have a symbiotic relationship. This is the second point of discussion that has held the attention of readers of this book. Of course, James Scott deserves huge praise for rejecting any analysis which would view tribes as isolated and inward-looking societies. Still, by attributing everything to the state, the author is minimising the role of any dynamics that are internal to the groups he is studying. The historian Victor Lieberman thus reminds us that conflict and violence were not at all absent from the lives of these communities, and that they were also not quite as egalitarian as Scott often seems to suggest¹¹. Conversely, his vision of the state seems very monolithic, and not very historical, even if he does for example underline the consequence of displacements of populations on the organisation of the state and its functioning like a "concertina". However, over a period of over two thousand years, the manifestations of state sovereignty mostly remain the same, aimed at a single objective of identifying, making sedentary and appropriating populations. The state's thought and action structures do not develop much (except after 1945), despite technical and intellectual changes. Sovereignty as defined by Scott thus appears as immutable, and always harmful. But have states not learnt from their failures? Are the qualities of flexibility and adaptability the prerogative of hill peoples, or can we imagine that states might have developed more diffuse and indirect forms of governmentality in order to overcome the resistance of populations, even if this means putting themselves at their service? The answer, even if it is a negative one, at any rate encourages a

which would contradict the argument that the situation of the peoples of the hills and of the valleys was hardly any different, in this period, with regards to the mastery of writing.

¹⁰ Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'État. Recherches d'anthropologie politique*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1974, p. 18.

¹¹ Victor Lieberman, "A zone of refuge in Southeast Asia? Reconceptualizing interior spaces", *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, no. 2, July 2010, p. 333-346.

fruitful reflection on the recent mutations of sovereignty and on the mechanics of its deterritorialisation¹².

Whatever the future of Zomia is, the issue of liminal and interstitial areas is still as relevant as ever, and Scott's work contributes to underlining its importance, both in political and scientific terms. Despite the proliferation of nation-states, similar areas continue to exist and to play a crucial role in globalisation, sometimes for the best, often for the worst. We might think, for example, of the great conflict zones (Pashtun tribal areas, Sahel), of the murky waters of piracy (Strait of Malacca, Somali coast), or of tax havens, those welcoming refuges for the great fortunes of the planet and for criminal networks. For centuries, the weak peoples so well studied by Scott have resisted thanks to the virtues of nomadic life, fluidity and the play with identities. Are these not the modern weapons used by the most powerful people today to escape from the constraints of sovereignty or from the requirements of solidarity? Really, states might well also have a lot to learn from Zomia...

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Further Reading

- A portrait of James C. Scott, anthropologist and farmer, published in December 2012 in the *New York Times*: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/books/james-c-scott-farmer-and-scholar-of-anarchism.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
- "La montagne et la liberté", an old article by James C. Scott on Zomia published in French by *Critique internationale* (no. 11, 2001, p. 85-104): http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=CR11_011_0085
- Video of a lecture given in 2009 by James C. Scott at Cornell University about his book *The Art of Not Being Governed*: <http://www.cornell.edu/video/?videoID=625>
- "Dans le dos du pouvoir", an interview of James C. Scott in the magazine *Vacarme*, carried out in 2008 by Gilles Chantraine and Olivier Ruchet, about his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: <http://www.vacarme.org/article1491.html>
- Special issue of the *Journal of Global History* devoted to an analysis of the concept and space of Zomia (limited access): <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayIssue?decade=2010&jid=JGH&volumeId=5&issueId=02&iid=7807274>
- Online review by Nicholas Tapp (Australian National University) of the James C. Scott's book: <http://aseasuk.org.uk/v2/aseasuknews/%252Fbookreviews/47/Scott>
- Debate, in English, about Scott's book, with critical reviews from Michael Dove, Hjørleifur Jonsson and Michael Aung-Thwin: http://www.academia.edu/511756/States_lie_and_stories_are_tools_Following_up_on_Zomia
- Tom Brass' (very) critical reading of Scott's book, which accuses the author of playing into the hand of conservative neoliberalism, "Scott's "Zomia", or a populist post-modern history of nowhere", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 42, no. 1, February 2012, p. 123-133 (limited access): <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00472336.2012.634646>

¹² On *Books and Ideas*, see for example Stephen Sawyer's review of the book by John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, published on 24 February 2010: www.lavedesidees.fr/La-fin-de-la-souverainete.html

James C. Scott: Main Works

- *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, 1976.
- *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1985.
- *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, 1990 (Fr. Trans.: *La Domination ou les arts de la résistance. Fragments du discours subalterne*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, trans. Olivier Ruchet, 2009).
- *Seeing like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, 1998
- *The Art of Not Being Governed. An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, 2009 (Fr. Trans.: *Zomia, ou l'art de ne pas être gouverné*, Paris, Seuil, trans. Nicolas Guilhot, Frédéric Joly, Olivier Ruchet, 2013).
- *Two Cheers for Anarchism. Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, Princeton University Press, 2012.