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Book Review

James C. Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Jeemut Pratim Das

‘The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia’, published in 2009, marked a renewed focus on the history and people of the Southeast Asian mainland massif of ‘*zomia*’, a term that Scott borrows from Willem Van Schendel¹ to denote the geographical region stretching from the mountain highlands of Vietnam to India’s northeastern regions. This area, he argues, is populated by people characterized by a *history of escapism* from the expansionist *padi* wet rice agricultural states of the lowlands over the course of their fluid history, thereby seeking to contest the common assumption of them being left behind in the march of civilizational progress and being reduced to uncivilized barbarians in the process. Scott argues that the art of escaping was a deliberate choice rather than a forced exclusion, where the history of the hills is itself a unique construction of a ‘state effect’ of ‘ingathering’ of populations that seeks to make the peripheries visible and legible in the eyes of the modern state. By extension, this denotes an *anarchist* and non-state history as the choice came ‘from below’ and was not a state imposition, though the lenses through which the hills are viewed still exist and are defined and reified by (misguided) state practices of ordering the totality of existence within its increasingly well-defined borders.

This book marks the intersection of a number of Scott’s multifarious interests, cutting across history, polity, economy and religious and social life on the hills in contrast to the predominance of literature concerned with the plains and their defining characteristic of the *padi* agricultural state. The first caveat of his work that Scott points out in the opening preface itself is the irrelevancy of the geographical region of Zomia the post Second World war, as the modern states grew to achieve the status of a *leviathan*, concentrating on establishing its rule and legitimacy through the consolidation of its territories. This involved the creation and invention of categories like the ‘tribes’ and ‘tribal’ to denote those pre-existing communities of the periph-

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eral hills and their distinct and ‘traditional’ cultural and linguistic practices. Scott argues that this saw their categorization into separate, radically distinct and watertight compartments, a world away from the underlying heterogeneity and fluidity. The rise of the process of ‘othering’ gradually came to override all history and literature concerned with the study of these (apparently) backward and primitive societies; and the hills who had voluntarily left behind the written form of communication in favour of ‘orality’ were gradually lost¹ to history, confined to its very margins.

This aspect of historical re-constructionism, Scott argues always exists in a relational space that Zomia shares with the state- space. Despite its history of vibrant trade relations with neighboring valleys and highlands, the Zomian history of a “plurality of state centres as the reality” (Scott, 2009, p. 58) was obfuscated in their appropriation by the state, whose misleading geographical cartographic explorations and friction-reducing technologies focused more on reducing the distance-gap rather than the gap of ‘time’. Further, the modern states were ignorant of the inherent contradiction in their approaches towards (indirectly) governing the highlands, where the more the population they sought to bring within its ambit, the more the urge to withdraw from state exploitation, slavery, disease and overburdening taxation grew. This entire debate of social reproduction and construction existed under the umbrella of the overarching assumption that the *padi* state was a marker of a “civilized” life, in contrast to the “agro-ecological code” (ibid., p. 100) of the barbarians. This barbarian-civilized duality was an anomaly in the context of the lived experiences of the hills, as the realities of intersections within the barbarians themselves was done away with gradually. However, Scott also does indeed point out that the state faced the necessity of classification, again feeding into the project of “self-barbarization” (p. 126) post their choice of exit from the state.

Borrowing immensely from the works of Edmund Leach, Scott too sees Zomia as a (sometimes overridingly so) geographical space, peopled by communities in the search for individual self-autonomy (ibid. p. 188). Foraging and nomadic pastoralism are the most convenient strategies to combat the settled agricultural patterns of the valley states and civilizations, and the introduction of “new world crops” (p. 200) like maize and cassava further buffers their “political choice” (p. 190) to leave everything behind.

However, it does seem that Scott’s notion of ‘tribality’ itself as a state (valley) construct is riddled with internal incoherencies. While it is true that the term and usage of ‘tribal’ was indeed a product of the state’s attempt to understand and classify previously un-encountered non-states, Scott does also point out that the hill societies themselves existed in a mutually interlinked set of (relatively) *autonomous* units, to be used as building blocks of ‘indigenous’ knowledge creation as and when required by the states. Did the statist misconception then lie in merely over-emphasizing on their apparent uniqueness and the “creation of meaningless chiefdoms” (p. 213) along a sharply graded scale instead of their actual connectedness? Even though the basic foundation of autonomy is present in both sides of the argument, it is seen from two entirely contradicting visions. Scott does not tackle this question and dilemma in a direct manner as his primary focus does lie elsewhere; on unraveling the tactics in the battle for power between the subordinated hills and the dominating valleys.

On a different note, when we return to his idea of the inherent nature of agricultural patterns as leading to a civilizational divide between the hills and the valleys, his notion of “hyper appropriation” (p. 180) seems to stretch the idea a bit too far, as Dove et al (2011) state. For Scott, the new world crops and tubers of the hilly terrains facilitate such an act of resisting the state due to their ability to be cultivated in rough and inhospitable environments. This seems to be a justifiable statement drawn from a basis in empirical instances of expansion of the Han dynasty, but to proclaim the entirety of Zomia as following a similar pattern tends to border on over generalization. One of Scott’s redeeming features and perhaps his greatest gift though, is that of laying down the boundaries of his work and pointing out the fuzzy nature of his constructions on several occasions. One evident instance of this lies in his assertion that there may be regions of mini-zomias elsewhere too, most notably in Africa and Latin America, where the existence of marshes and swamps provide a natural barrier to those seeking to willfully resist the state. But, he himself seems quite apprehensive of bringing them inside the category of ‘statelessness’ and Zomia because he is empirically yet to verify their livelihood and societal patterns of existence. This act of self-limitation acts as a defense against those wishing to critique the Works of James C. Scott, for he himself categorically asserts that the idea of Zomia needs to be studied and analyzed in far greater detail than his own work.

Perhaps the utmost controversy pertaining to his work comes from his writings in Chapter 6 ½ titled ‘Orality, Writing and Texts’. As Michaud (2017) points out, Scott was himself apprehensive of including such an underdeveloped chapter in the book. Here, Scott contends that the societies in Zomia are not *preliterate*, but actually *postliterate* (Scott, 2009, p. 220-221). His *postliterate* societies are named so because of two reasons – firstly to overcome the negative connotations of the word ‘illiterate’ in the statist discourse, and secondly, to signify the fact that they have willingly left the written art of communication behind in history to further aid their process of distancing themselves from the mainstream civilizations. What is of vital importance here is that Scott *appears* to move away from his all-encompassing solely positive way of looking at the hills of Zomia. Here, he agrees that such a strategy of leaving written history behind may have had their beneficial effects in restructuring the society without the need to fall back upon verification against the written word, but the long-run effects *may* be more detrimental as it leads to multiplicity of contrasting claims over time, each seeking to portray itself as the absolute version of truth. “A written genealogy, by contrast, freezes one variant of an evolving oral flux and, as it were, remove[ing] it from time, making it available in that form to future generations” (ibid., p. 233). The aspect of limiting oneself plagues Scott again here, as he defends his imperceptible shift in terms of language acting as one of the aiders of state hegemonic practices, the dilution of the written language being only one among the many strategies adopted in a stance of counter-resistance.

The book ‘The Art of Not Being Governed’ thus ends up as a difficult task to review because it appears more as development and exploration of a hypothesis, than the application and testability of that hypothesis itself. But what if we counter the foundational basis of his work itself- the (assumed) distinction between life in the

hills and the plains as the starting point of his hypothesis? Would it then be a valid critical analysis? After all, does not every narrative invariably possess a counter narrative? This exact point has been pointed out by several reviewers of this seminal work, such as Barth (2010), Karlsson (2013), Michaud (2017) and others. They argue that in seeking to decipher this invisible counter-narrative and bring it to the forefront, Scott neglects where it all started- the structures at play in the plains itself. As a result, Scott is unable to escape that very aspect that he asserts to do, that of *not* seeing the hills from the perspective of the valleys. Taking Nagaland as a case in point, Karlsson (2013) extends the possibility that Scott ends up making a history about Zomians, without the consultation of the concerned people of Zomia themselves. He therefore still exists within the dominant statist notion of ‘seeing like the state’ rather than being able to do justice to his stated objective of ‘seeing the state’. Therefore, one may possibly question, are James Scott and Zomia irrelevant? Absolutely not, as the construction of “zones of refuge” and “shatter zones” in Zomia still marked a paradigm shift in the literature of those existing beyond the governing arm of the state. To that effect, the book was a major success as it caught the dominant academia off-guard and renewed interest in the “hidden transcripts” of Zomian societies. Scheidermann’s (2010) idea of extending the boundaries of Zomia to the Central Himalayan regions of Tibet and Nepal may thus mark a mere revision and substantiation of the general works of Scott, but do no injustice to him whatsoever.

Notes

¹ Though, as Scheidermann (2010) points out, Scott (2009) limited his conceptualization of Zomia so as “to detach the Central and Western Himalayan Massif from van Schendel’s Zomia” (Scheidermann, 2010, p. 293).

² Scott borrows Geoffrey Benjamin’s idea of “dissimulation” (p. 173) here, as seeing the history of Zomia not from the statist vantage point of a “fall from grace” in contrast to a civilizational narrative, but in terms of a loss for the states themselves. This aspect once recognized by the expansionist state, starts off its quest for raw materials, resources and people, which are unavoidable targets on the path to modernization.

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