

"A brilliant study rich with humanity and cultural insights, this book will change the way readers think about human history—and about themselves."—Robert W. Hefner

The background of the book cover is a historical painting. The top half shows a large, rugged mountain with a prominent peak, its slopes covered in sparse vegetation and some rocky outcrops. Below the mountain, a river flows through a valley. On the right side of the river, there is a large, walled village or town with many small, red-roofed buildings. To the left of the river, there are several smaller, isolated buildings, possibly a farm or a small settlement. The overall style is that of a 19th-century landscape painting, with a focus on natural beauty and human habitation.

The Art of **Not** Being Governed

AN ANARCHIST HISTORY OF UPLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

JAMES C. SCOTT

The Art of Not Being Governed

An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia

James C. Scott



Yale University Press NEW HAVEN & LONDON

Published with assistance from the Mary Cady Tew Memorial Fund.

Copyright © 2009 by Yale University.

All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Ehrhardt type by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Scott, James C.

The art of not being governed : an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia / James C. Scott.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-300-15228-9 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Ethnology—Southeast Asia. 2. Peasantry—Southeast Asia—Political activity. 3. Southeast Asia—Politics and government—1945–.

4. Southeast Asia—Rural conditions. I. Title.

DS523.3.S36 2009

305.800959—dc22

2009003004

ISBN 978-0-300-16917-1 (pbk.)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state.

—Pierre Clastres, *La société contre l'état*

Preface

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 (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about one hundred million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety. Geographically, it is also known as the Southeast Asian mainland massif. Since this huge area is at the periphery of nine states and at the center of none, since it also bestrides the usual regional designations (Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia), and since what makes it interesting is its ecological variety as well as its relation to states, it represents a novel object of study, a kind of transnational Appalachia, and a new way to think of area studies.

My thesis is simple, suggestive, and controversial. *Zomia* is the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states. Its days are numbered. Not so very long ago, however, such self-governing peoples were the great majority of humankind. Today, they are seen from the valley kingdoms as “our living ancestors,” “what we were like before we discovered wet-rice cultivation, Buddhism, and civilization.” On the contrary, I argue that hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.

Most of the areas in which they reside may be aptly called shatter zones or zones of refuge.

Virtually everything about these people's livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, and (more controversially) even their largely oral cultures, can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm's length. Their physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility, their cropping practices, their kinship structure, their pliable ethnic identities, and their devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders effectively serve to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them. The particular state that most of them have been evading has been the precocious Han-Chinese state. A history of flight is embedded in many hill legends. The documentary record, although somewhat speculative until 1500, is clear enough after that, including frequent military campaigns against hill peoples under the Ming and Qing dynasties and culminating in the unprecedented uprisings in southwestern China in the mid-nineteenth century that left millions seeking refuge. The flight from both the Burmese and Thai slave-raiding states is also amply documented.

My argument will, I hope, have some resonance beyond the already broad swath of Asia with which it is immediately concerned.

The huge literature on state-making, contemporary and historic, pays virtually no attention to its obverse: the history of deliberate and reactive statelessness. This is the history of those who got away, and state-making cannot be understood apart from it. This is also what makes this an anarchist history.

This account implicitly brings together the histories of all those peoples extruded by coercive state-making and unfree labor systems: Gypsies, Cosacks, polyglot tribes made up of refugees from Spanish *reducciones* in the New World and the Philippines, fugitive slave communities, the Marsh Arabs, San-Bushmen, and so on.

The argument reverses much received wisdom about "primitivism" generally. Pastoralism, foraging, shifting cultivation, and segmentary lineage systems are often a "secondary adaptation," a kind of "self-barbarianization" adopted by peoples whose location, subsistence, and social structure are adapted to state evasion. For those living in the shadow of states, such evasion is also perfectly compatible with derivative, imitative, and parasitic state forms in the hills.

My argument is a deconstruction of Chinese and other civilizational discourses about the "barbarian," the "raw," the "primitive." On close in-

spection those terms, practically, mean ungoverned, not-yet-incorporated. Civilizational discourses never entertain the possibility of people voluntarily going over to the barbarians, hence such statuses are stigmatized and ethnized. Ethnicity and “tribe” begin exactly where taxes and sovereignty end — in the Roman Empire as in the Chinese.

Usually, forms of subsistence and kinship are taken as given, as ecologically and culturally determined. By analyzing various forms of cultivation, particular crops, certain social structures, and physical mobility patterns for their escape value, I treat such givens largely as political choices.

The mountains as a refuge for state-fleeing people, including guerrillas, is an important geographical theme. I develop the idea of the friction of terrain, which is a new way of understanding political space and the difficulties of state-making in premodern societies.

I’m the only one to blame for this book. I did it. Let’s get that out of the way before I begin making apologies and trying, in vain, I know, to make a few preemptive strikes against some of the criticism I can, even as I write this, see bearing down on me.

I’ve often been accused of being wrong but rarely of being obscure or incomprehensible. This book is no different. There’s no denying that I make bold claims about the hill peoples of mainland Southeast Asia. I think, naturally, that my claims are broadly correct, even if I may be mistaken in some particulars. Judgment of whether I am right is, as always, now out of my hands and in that of my readers and reviewers. There are, however, three things about these claims that I wish to assert emphatically. First, there is nothing original here. I repeat, there is not a single idea here that originates with me. What I surely have done is to see a kind of immanent order or argument in a good many of the sources I canvassed and to draw that argument out to see how far it would take me. The creative aspect, if there was any, was to make out this gestalt and to connect the dots. I realize that some of those whose arguments and speculations I have made use of will think I have gone too far—a few of them have told me so and, mercifully for me, others are no longer in a position to complain. They are no more responsible for what I have done with their ideas than I will be for what use others make of what I have written here.

To my mild astonishment, I find that I have become a kind of historian—not a particularly good one, perhaps, but a historian nonetheless. And an ancient historian at that: ancient in both senses of the term. I am familiar

with the occupational hazard of historians, namely that a historian preparing herself to write, say, about the eighteenth century ends up writing mostly about the seventeenth century because it comes to seem so fundamental to the question at issue. Something like that happened to me. Here I was reading ethnographies of hill peoples and reports on human rights abuses by the Burmese military in minority areas only to find myself drawn inexorably back to the coercive state-making of the classical mandala kingdoms. I owe my renewed study of precolonial and colonial Southeast Asia to two independent graduate reading courses. One was devoted to foundational texts in Southeast Asian studies and designed as a kind of intellectual boot camp in which we read all those basic works most scholars had on their shelves but would be embarrassed to admit that they had never read, beginning with the two volumes of the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*. It was bracing for all of us. The second was a reading course on Burma, starting from the same premise.

This brings me to my second emphatic assertion. What I have to say in these pages makes little sense for the period following the Second World War. Since 1945, and in some cases before then, the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies—railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology—so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, so diminished the friction of terrain, that my analysis largely ceases to be useful. On the contrary, the sovereign nation-state is now busy projecting its power to its outermost territorial borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty. The need for the natural resources of the “tribal zone” and the desire to ensure the security and productivity of the periphery has led, everywhere, to strategies of “engulfment,” in which presumptively loyal and land-hungry valley populations are transplanted to the hills. So if my analysis does not apply to late-twentieth-century Southeast Asia, don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Finally, I worry that the radical constructionist case made here about ethnogenesis will be misunderstood and taken as a devaluation, even denigration, of ethnic identities for which brave men and women have fought and died. Nothing could be further from the truth. *All* identities, without exception, have been socially constructed: the Han, the Burman, the American, the Danish, all of them. Quite often such identities, particularly minority identities, are at first imagined by powerful states, as the Han imagined the Miao, the British colonists imagined the Karen and the Shan, the French the Jarai.

Whether invented or imposed, such identities select, more or less arbitrarily, one or another trait, however vague—religion, language, skin color, diet, means of subsistence—as the desideratum. Such categories, institutionalized in territories, land tenure, courts, customary law, appointed chiefs, schools, and paperwork, may become passionately lived identities. To the degree that the identity is stigmatized by the larger state or society, it is likely to become for many a resistant and defiant identity. Here invented identities combine with self-making of a heroic kind, in which such identifications become a badge of honor. In the contemporary world in which the nation-state is the hegemonic political unit, it is not surprising that such self-assertion should usually take the form of ethnonationalism. So for those who risk everything so that the Shan, the Karen, the Chin, the Mon, the Kayah may achieve some form of independence and recognition, I have only admiration and respect.

I owe an enormous intellectual debt to at least five “dead white men” — whose ranks I shall join in due course. They were the pioneers of the trail along which I plod here; I wouldn’t even have found it without them. The earliest was Pierre Clastres, whose daring interpretation of state-evading and state-preventing native peoples in post-Conquest South America in *La société contre l’état* has come, in the wake of subsequent evidence, to seem clairvoyant. Owen Lattimore’s deep and ambitious insights into the relationship between Han-Chinese states and their pastoralist periphery helped me to see that something similar might hold for China’s southwest frontier. Ernest Gellner’s analysis of Berber-Arab relations helped me grasp that where sovereignty and taxes stopped, there precisely, “ethnicity” and “tribes” began, and that *barbarian* was another word states used to describe any self-governing, nonsubject people. No one who plods the route I have taken gets anywhere without a sustained intellectual encounter with Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. There are few books that are so “good to think with.” Finally, I am in debt to James G. Scott, aka Shwe Yoe, military commander, colonial official, compiler of the *Gazetteer of Upper Burma* and author of *The Burman*. He is no relative, but as I have learned so much from his acute observations and as we are both, according to Burmese astrological reckoning, entitled to Burmese names of the same sort, I have adopted his Burmese name, Shwe Yoe, in a bid to please his ghost.

I have been inspired and instructed by work that reexamined how out-of-the-way people came to be out of the way in the first place, while radically questioning the civilizational discourse applied to them by their self-described superiors. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán’s small classic, *Regions of*

Refuge, published nearly thirty years ago, made a more general claim than Clastres for much of the Latin American continent, and subsequently Stuart Schwartz and Frank Salomon examined that claim in more careful, illuminating detail. Closer to my own geographic focus, Robert Hefner's study of the Tengger Highlands of Java and Geoffrey Benjamin's work on Malaysia's *orang asli* were convincing and brilliant case studies that encouraged me to see Zomia in this light.

The term *Zomia* I owe entirely to Willem van Schendel, who was perceptive enough to realize that this huge upland border area stretching in the west to India (and well beyond, in his view) was distinctive enough to merit its own designation. In sketching out an intellectual case for "Zomia studies" as a field of research, he called into question the routine ways in which we think about *area* or *region*. I enrolled as a foot soldier in the Zomia army (psychological warfare branch) immediately after reading his persuasive argument for the term. Willem and I and several colleagues look forward to the day we are able to convene the first International Zomia Studies Conference. Van Schendel's work on the Bengal borderland is already an example of what might be achieved if we took his advice to heart.

Had I the patience and even more of an impulse to comprehensiveness, there would and should have been a chapter on watery regions of refuge. I mention them only in passing and regret that I haven't been able to do them justice. The numerous *orang laut* (sea nomads, sea gypsies) in insular Southeast Asia are clearly a seagoing, archipelago-hopping variant of swiddeners dwelling in mountain fastnesses. Like many hill people they also have a martial tradition and have moved easily between piracy (seaborne raiding), slave-raiding, and serving as the naval guard and strike force of several Malay kingdoms. Poised strategically at the edge of major shipping lanes, able to strike and disappear quickly, they conjure up a whole watery Zomia that deserves a place here. As Ben Anderson noted while urging me in this direction, "The sea is bigger, emptier than the mountains and the forest. Look at all those pirates still easily fending off the G-7, Singapore, etc., with aplomb." But as any reader will note, this book is already too long, and I must leave this theme to others more competent to pursue it: a task already excellently begun by Eric Tagliacozzo.

There are four scholars whose work falls smack in the middle of my own concerns and without which this book would scarcely be conceivable. I don't know how many times I have read and reread the, in effect, collected works of F. K. L. (Lehman) Chit Hlaing and Richard O'Connor for their deep

insights and what they might mean for my own argument. Victor Lieberman, the premier historian of Southeast Asia state-making in a comparative frame, and Jean Michaud, who raised the banner of Zomia (or what he would call the Southeast Asian massif) well before the rest of us, have been key interlocutors. All four of these scholars have shown me an intellectual large-spiritedness of a very high order, even, and especially, when they disagreed with me. They may dissent from much of what I say here, but they should know that they have made me smarter, though not quite as smart as they may have hoped. I am, in addition, indebted to Jean Michaud for generously allowing me to use passages from his *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif* for my glossary.

There is a large number of colleagues who, having better things to do with their time, nevertheless read part or all of the manuscript and gave me their frank advice. I hope they see, here and there, evidence of their impact as I bobbed and weaved my way to a more nuanced and defensible argument. They include, in no particular order, Michael Adas, Ajay Skaria, Ramachandra Guha, Tania Li, Ben Anderson, Michael Aung-Thwin, Masao Imamura, the historians U Tha Htun Maung and U Soe Kyaw Thu, the archaeologist U Tun Thein, the geologist Arthur Pe, Geoffrey Benjamin, Shan-shan Du, Mandy Sadan, Michael Hathaway, Walt Coward, Ben Kerkvliet, Ron Herring, Indrani Chatterjee, Khin Maung Win, Michael Dove, James Hagen, Jan-Bart Gewald, Thomas Barfield, Thongchai Winichakul, Katherine Bowie, Ben Kiernan, Pamela McElwee, Nance Cunningham, Aung Aung, David Ludden, Leo Lucassen, Janice Stargardt, Tony Day, Bill Klausner, Mya Than, Susan O'Donovan, Anthony Reid, Martin Klein, Jo Guldi, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, Bo Bo Nge, Magnus Fiskesjö, Mary Callahan, Enrique Mayer, Angelique Haugerud, Michael McGovern, Thant Myint U, Marc Edelman, Kevin Heppner, Christian Lentz, Annping Chin, Prasentjit Duara, Geoff Wade, Charles Keyes, Andrew Turton, Noburu Ishikawa, Kennon Breazeale, and Karen Barkey. Wait! I have secreted in this list four colleagues who failed to send their comments. You know who you are. For shame! If, on the other hand, you collapsed trying to carry the manuscript from the printer to your desk, my apologies.

I want to acknowledge a small number of collegial debts that are not easy to categorize. Hjorleifur Jonsson's uniquely perceptive book *Mien Relations* was very influential in my thinking, especially with respect to the pliability of hill identities and social structure. Mikael Gravers has taught me a great deal about the Karen and the cosmological basis of their millenarian

proclivities. Eric Tagliacozzo read the manuscript with unprecedented care and assigned me a reading program that I am still trying to complete. Finally, I have learned a great deal from five colleagues with whom I set out to study “vernacular and official identities” many years back: Peter Sahlins, Pingkaew Luanggaramsri, Kwanchewan Buadaeng, Chusak Wittayapak, and Janet Sturgeon, who is, *avant la lettre*, a practicing Zomianist.

Some time back, in 1996, my colleague Helen Siu persuaded me to attend, as discussant, a conference on China’s borders and border peoples. Organized by Helen, Pamela Crossley, and David Faure, this conference was so provocative and lively that it served to germinate a good many of the ideas found here. The book arising from that meeting and edited by Pamela Crossley, Helen Siu, and Donald Sutton, *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), is packed with original history, theory, and ethnography.

There are a good many institutions that harbored and supported me over the past decade while I ever so slowly found my bearings. I started background reading on upland Southeast Asia and on the relationship between states and itinerant peoples generally at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, where Alex Keyssar, Nancy Cott, Tony Bebbington, and Dan Segal were boon intellectual companions. That reading continued in the spring of 2001 at Oslo’s Centre for Development and the Environment, where I was the beneficiary of the intellect and charm of Desmond McNeill, Signe Howell, Nina Witoczek, and Bernt Hagvet and began Burmese lessons in earnest at the Democratic Voice of Burma radio station under the tolerant eye of Khin Maung Win. I finished the first draft of this manuscript while visiting the Department of Society and Globalization of the Graduate School of International Development Studies at Roskilde University. I want to record my warm thanks to Christian Lund, Preben Kaarsholm, Bodil Folke Frederiksen, Inge Jensen, and Ole Brun for an intellectually bracing and thoroughly enjoyable stay.

For the past two decades my real intellectual sustenance has come from the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University. The agraristas, fellows, speakers, graduate students, and associated faculty with whom I have taught have continually renewed my faith in the possibility of an intellectual venue that is both convivial and challenging, welcoming and tough. Kay Mansfield has always been, and continues to be, the heart and soul of the program, the compass from which we take our bearings. My colleagues K. Sivarama-

krishnan (aka Shivi), Eric Worby, Robert Harms, Arun Agrawal, Paul Freedman, Linda-Anne Rebhun, and Michael Dove have all taken a liberal hand in my continuing education. Michael Dove and Harold Conklin have, between them, taught me everything I know about swidden cultivation that plays such an important role in my analysis.

I have had a series of research assistants of such initiative and talent that they have saved me many months of futile toil and many errors. They will, I am confident, make names for themselves in short order. Arash Khazeni, Shafqat Hussein, Austin Zeiderman, Alexander Lee, Katie Scharf, and Kate Harrison helped turn this project into something creditable.

Those many Burmese friends who refereed my struggles with the Burmese language deserve at least hazardous duty pay and perhaps sainthood—or perhaps that would be deva-hood in the Theravada context. I want to thank Saya Khin Maung Gyi, my longest-serving, most battle-scarred, and most patient teacher, as well as his entire family, including San San Lin. Let Let Aung (aka Viola Wu), Bo Bo Nge, KaLu Paw, and Khin Maung Win courageously braved painfully slow and misshapen conversations. Kaung Kyaw and Ko Soe Kyaw Thu, though not formally teachers, nonetheless, in befriending me, pushed me forward. Finally, in Mandalay and on various travels, Saya Naing Tun Lin, a natural teacher, invented a pedagogy suited to my modest talents and pursued it rigorously. We often had lessons on the spacious fourth-floor balcony of a small hotel. When I massacred, for the fourth or fifth time, the same tone or aspirate, he would abruptly rise and walk away to the edge of the balcony. I feared more than once that he would hurl himself over the railing in despair. He didn't. Instead he would come back, sit down, take a very deep breath, and resume. I would not have gotten through without him.

While I was casting around for an appropriate title, a friend mentioned that Jimmy Casas Klausen, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, was teaching a course in political philosophy titled *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Klausen generously agreed to let me use the title for my book, for which I am very grateful indeed. I await the day when he will no doubt put a philosophical footing under this whole enterprise with a book of his own on the subject.

The maps in this volume were created with skill and imagination by Stacey Maples at the Yale Map Collection of Sterling Library. He gave cartographic shape to my understanding of the spatial issues in Southeast Asian statecraft.

Where it seemed appropriate I have added Burmese words and occasionally a phrase to the text. As there is no universally agreed upon system for transliterating Burmese into roman letters, I have adopted the system devised by John Okell at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and explained in his *Burmese: An Introduction to the Spoken Language*, Book 1 (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1994). To avoid any confusion, where the Burmese term seems important, I have added it in Burmese script.

I could not have asked for a more supportive and talented editor for this, and for the other titles in the Agrarian Studies Series, than Jean Thomson Black. Nor could Yale University Press ask for a more inspired editor. My manuscript editor, Dan Heaton, combined a respect for the text with a firmness about my errors and excesses that has greatly improved what the reader will encounter.

Last, and by no means least, I couldn't have thought or lived my way through this manuscript without the insights and companionship of my high altitude muse.

The Art of Not Being Governed

Contents

Preface ix

1. Hills, Valleys, and States: An Introduction to Zomia 1
2. State Space: Zones of Governance and Appropriation 40
3. Concentrating Manpower and Grain: Slavery and Irrigated Rice 64
4. Civilization and the Unruly 98
5. Keeping the State at a Distance: The Peopling of the Hills 127
6. State Evasion, State Prevention: The Culture and Agriculture of Escape 178
- 6½. Orality, Writing, and Texts 220
7. Ethnogenesis: A Radical Constructionist Case 238
8. Prophets of Renewal 283
9. Conclusion 324

Notes 339

Glossary 407

Index 415

CHAPTER 1

Hills, Valleys, and States *An Introduction to Zomia*

I open with three diagnostic expressions of frustration. The first two are from would-be conquering administrators, determined to subdue a recalcitrant landscape and its fugitive, resistant inhabitants. The third, from a different continent, is from a would-be conqueror of souls, in some despair at the irreligion and heterodoxy that the landscape appears to encourage:

Making maps is hard, but mapping Guizhou province especially so. . . . The land in southern Guizhou has fragmented and confused boundaries. . . . A department or a county may be split into several subsections, in many instances separated by other departments or counties. . . . There are also regions of no man's land where the Miao live intermixed with the Chinese. . . .

Southern Guizhou has a multitude of mountain peaks. They are jumbled together, without any plains or marshes to space them out, or rivers or water courses to put limits to them. They are vexingly numerous and ill-disciplined. . . . Very few people dwell among them, and generally the peaks do not have names. Their configurations are difficult to discern clearly, ridges and summits seeming to be the same. Those who give an account of the arterial pattern of the mountains are thus obliged to speak at length. In some cases, to describe a few kilometers of ramifications needs a pile of documentation, and dealing with the main line of a day's march takes a sequence of chapters.

As to the confusion of the local patois, in the space of fifty kilometers a river may have fifty names and an encampment covering a kilometer and a half may have three designations. Such is the unreliability of the nomenclature.¹