

Book Report

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

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History as traditionally taught to us has been an account of States - of monarchs, wars, and coalitions. We can see immediately in this the bias towards major events and “political figures”, so to speak, over the common people. Yet, there’s another bias hidden in this study - the assumption of ‘Stateness’, that all of history can be encompassed by the study of the State, and those not under this purview are a fringe that need not be studied as closely.

James C. Scott’s ‘The Art of Not Being Governed : An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia’ is an opposition to such perspective. It is, as he has said, almost an ‘anarchist’ look at history.

Summarising the Book:

Starting off, the author makes the central claim of the book: there is a collection of loosely connected areas across Central and South-East Asia that share certain common features (primarily elevation) that deserve to be called a ‘region’ that he calls Zomia due to its people sharing common characteristics, characteristics that he claims are favourable to what he says is their ‘intentional statelessness’ - and that their statelessness is a conscious, political choice extending to cultural refusal as well, and not a result of being ‘left behind out of civilization’ as is the traditional claim. These are people who have politically made the decision to not be a part of the state architecture, and have fled away from it, modifying their lifestyle, their subsistence patterns, adopting oral cultures, in order to do so.

“...In other words, living in the absence of state structures has been the standard human condition.”

He begins his argument by analyzing a preexisting phenomenon - humans have mostly been historically stateless. Using this he is able to argue that the States of antiquity were relatively weak, almost definitely more so than their self-congratulatory records may claim; and that this meant that for much of history being subject to a State’s rule was a choice - one may, if they wish, leave. And people left. People often left the state for whatever reason, and people joined the state too (mostly as slaves, observing the largely nonfree populace).

Of course, mere statement does not an argument make: the author proceeds to analyse the State around Zomia - the reasons for its weakness, the conditions that led to people leaving (or joining) the State.

Analyzing the State, the Hills, and their interrelation

First, he examines the premodern State's inherent limitations on governance - factors contributing to its weakness. Then exploring mechanisms in which the state exists: concentrating manpower, 'grain slavery' and enforcing irrigated rice (padi) as a statemaking tool, and the rampant slavery needed to sustain the state (including slave raiding as an interaction with the highlanders and slaves constituting the majority of the population) - we get into the territory of reasons subjects might want to leave the State. All along we observe the close relations maintained with the non-state people for trade, primarily where they are considered as potential slaves for maintaining the kingdom.

He also examines the state's societal incentives, so to speak, for keeping subjects in chapter 4. We're introduced to the concept of equating 'civilization' with the idea of being a subject of the state - where the further one is from the state center, or the less cultural similarity one has to the ruling class, the less civilised one is. If one did not pay taxes to the state, then even being culturally identical would not save them from being 'utterly uncivilised' - 'raw', as the Han might have said. A stigma was built around uncivility. Yet, there is a strong relation constructed between the two classes with regard to trade - a crucial factor indicating their interdependence. Highlanders, while avoiding state rule, did not necessarily avoid states, dealing with them when necessary - and Scott claims, occasionally with the upper hand.

In chapter 5, Scott spends a while listing out multiple examples of non-state spaces, multiple migrations - 'The Long March', instances of rebellions and wars populating the large 'shatter zone' that we now come to know as Zomia. As was highlighted in earlier chapters, a bulk of highlanders were not people left behind civilization, but people who were in it and ran away to avoid it. Scott then highlights the methods of avoiding state rule - with example of the Karen, their need for mobility, agricultural choices, social structures, (lack of) writing traditions, 'tribal structure'. He talks about their propensity for following prophets, desire for egalitarian societies. Above all, we see exactly why the non-state people make the decisions they make, in direct opposition to the existence of the State.

Assessing the Book

As the author himself has noted, the account of history that is given in the book feels a bit too "anarchist". It focuses mostly on the story of statelessness, and even discussions on the state are sprinkled with a heavy dose of reasons for statelessness given the points just discussed. The author admits this, in the first chapter itself, claiming that it is so due to the undue representation of the 'state story' in other literature, due to which he has focused almost entirely on the opposing perspective instead of repeating what has already been said.

The claims made in this book are bold, and as such 'go against the grain' of what we normally assume to know. On a personal level, before reading the book I would not have considered statelessness as a historical default although it makes perfect sense, or have considered the Civilizational Narrative and the equating of 'civilized' to 'subject of the state'.

Assessing the Central Argument

The central argument - that of the settled people of Zomia as an intentionally 'uncivilised' group with a lifestyle tailored to avoiding state subjugation by all means possible - is postmodernist to its core. Where the traditional State narrative is of a benevolent one attracting subjects due to its propensity to take them forward, to develop and 'civilize' them, the argument made by Scott is an outright rejection of all this - if the people of the hills are those escaping State control then not all desire what is considered 'progress' under modernism. In fact, Scott at several points argues explicitly against the validity of any such State narrative, referring to the non-free early populace of the State and constant leak of subjects. In such instances, he refers often to multiple historical records, often using seemingly unrelated documents to infer something in between the lines - showing, to an extent, an Annales influence. This is spread throughout the book.

The basis for argument is not a priori - it is, as far as can be seen, a deductive one. While it seems (to be a priori) in the introduction of the book, further reading suggests otherwise: extensive research is presented on the conditions of the State and the Hills, that can lead to the final thesis, and from that deduction is made. While the final deduction is a slight jump, hinting perhaps a perceived intuition based on his past work, the analysis up to the point is solid insofar as historical narratives of stateless spaces go. Where he cannot find concrete or reliable records - as while trying to analyse the actual extent of the Kingdoms in Burma - he makes logical arguments for his stance with minimal assumptions.

The influence of Annales historians is most strongly seen in his discussion on maps. Specifically when referring to 'friction of distance maps', maps where time was the primary dimension and not space, and when using contour maps to estimate the maximum viable political control a kingdom could theoretically have. His explicit recognition of Zomia as a *longue duree* are further evidence as to the influence.

The discussion on Distance maps indicated a deeper understanding of Space-time from a non-'modern' perspective, much in the way the people of the time themselves would've seen things. This method is particularly helpful in analysing the potential ground truth for a population largely unrecorded in the history books.

Assessing Annales methods in Identifying State Spaces

To first identify the inherent limitations on governance in the pre-modern State: one can identify that the political control of the pre-modern State extended to only a maximum of about 300-500km from the Court Center. It was a limitation imposed by the distance within which a population could properly be taxed (since the basic state activity is permanent settlement with taxes). Taxes - usually produce - had to be sent to the centre of the State, which is where the limitations of transport came into play even on the plains after a certain amount of time transporting the produce would no longer be economical. This analysis

provides us an accurate picture of the true size of states, albeit disagreeing with official state 'records'.