

# The rationality of taking to the hills

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**Abstract** In *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), Scott revises the state generated narratives of the hill people of Zomia which describes them as an aboriginal population that have simply failed to become more civilized. As an alternative, Scott views hill peoples as state-repelling societies or even anti-state societies. As we suggest in this article, by at least implicitly employing a rational choice framework, Scott is able to make sense why people would attempt to avoid being state subjects by taking to the hills as well as why their descendants have remained in the hills.

**Keywords** Anarchy · Hill peoples · Southeast Asia · James C. Scott

**JEL codes** P48 · O53 · N95 · Z13

## 1 Introduction

James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) is a book that he wanted to write a decade earlier. Instead, he ended up taking what he describes as an “intellectual detour” and writing *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1999). As Scott (1999: 1) writes, “originally, I set out to understand why the state has always seemed to be the enemy of ‘people who move around,’ to put it crudely. In the context of Southeast Asia, this promised to be a fruitful way of addressing the

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The standard disclaimer applies to this study.

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perennial tensions between mobile, slash-and-burn hill peoples on one hand and wet-rice, valley kingdoms on the other.”

His intellectual detour, then, was an effort to explain why states engage in large-scale social engineering projects and why those projects are likely to fail. As he (ibid.: 5) writes, “the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build.” Stated another way, the state’s ability to classify peoples (e.g., as citizens and non-citizens, adults and minors, etc.) and to simplify the various building blocks of society (e.g., delineating between taxable and non-taxable property, acceptable, and unacceptable contracts, etc.) makes modern statecraft possible, while the all too widely held belief (by state officials and citizens alike) that society could and should be planned and controlled provides the impetus for grandiose efforts at social reconstruction. These efforts, however, are bound to fail, as Scott (ibid.: 6) argues, because they are necessarily “parasitic on informal processes that, alone, [they] could not create or maintain.” State produced designs for social organization, he explains, do not allow adequate scope for “practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability” (ibid.).

Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) is a better book for his having taken that detour a decade ago. Cognizant of the limits of state action, this new effort adds a novel and rich angle to the existing literature that defines hill peoples as barbarians. The traditional or rather state sponsored narratives view hill people as an “aboriginal population that had failed, for one reason or another, to make the transition to a more civilized way of life: especially, to settled, wet rice agriculture, lowland religion, and membership (as a subject or citizen) in a larger political community” (Scott 2009: 128). Scott, however, argues against this conventional view and, instead, suggests that viewing “hill peoples as state-repelling societies-or even anti-state societies-makes far more sense of agricultural practices, cultural values, and social structure in the hills” (Scott 2009: 128). For Scott, hill peoples have successfully resisted state making, arguably the most grandiose of all social reconstruction schemes.

Historically, “civilized” has meant those who live as a subject of the state. Since the hill peoples exist outside of the state and so outside of civilization, their language, occupations and culture have been much maligned in the histories written by the “civilized.” What gets obscured in these histories is that the hill peoples *chose* to leave the state. It is in this regard that Scott’s book is distinctive. His work focuses on the *choices* made by the hill peoples and not just their *habits* and *practices*. He, thus, implicitly positions his detailed historical and anthropological narrative within a rational choice framework and emphasizes why it was rational for the people of Zomia, perhaps the largest non-subjugated region in the world, to avoid the direct power of the state.

For Scott, the hill people are those who had “reason to flee state power” due to the high costs of “living within civilization” including the certainty of taxes, the possibility of conscription, the likelihood of disease, the probability of poverty, and the potential of prison. It is because they have attempted to escape this tyranny and not because of any backwardness on their part, he argues, that they are described as barbaric. In this article, we focus the rationality of these so-called barbarians “taking

to the hills” as a strategy for escaping state oppression as well as the rationality of their remaining in the hills in present times.

## 2 The benefits and costs of taking to the hills

According to Scott (2009: 128), “hilliness is largely a state effect.” The hills, in his view, were peopled “by a process of state-evading migration” (ibid.). Understanding the decisions of hill peoples to “take to the hills,” therefore, requires understanding the benefits they hope to gain from fleeing direct state power and the costs associated with being nomadic and reclusive. There is much evidence that the villagers in South East Asia, like those in Early Europe, migrated whenever they were dissatisfied with their socio-economic conditions or when they perceived opportunities to improve their lives and to gain freedom in new areas (ibid.: 142). The hills, thus, became a “sanctuary” from the troubles affecting state subjects.

The (potential) costs of living under state rule in pre-colonial Southeast Asia and so the (potential) benefits of taking to the hills to avoid state rule could be quite large. Scott (ibid.) focuses on at least five rationales for migration (a) taxes, (b) war and rebellion, (c) raiding and slaving, (d) disease, and (e) religious oppression.

Oppressive taxes, like those levied in the pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms of Kyauk-se, which left communities “ruinously poor,” were quite typical in Southeast Asia, especially where states were large and powerful (ibid.: 145). In fact, migration due to oppressive taxes was so common that the key to statecraft in pre-colonial Southeast Asia was to “press the kingdom’s subjects only so far as not to provoke their wholesale departure” (ibid.: 144).

War and rebellion were also major causes of migration. The likelihood of being conscripted and so being forced to risk life and limb during wartime was quite high. In this regard, the case of Karen areas in Burma stands out. The “peace villages” that Burma’s military rulers established around the military bases in order to prevent rebellion were like concentration camps where the village headmen would supply laborers in exchange or risk having the villagers’ homes burnt. The non-state areas or the “hiding villages” just beyond the reach of the Burmese military, on the other hand, were often the only places where the Karen could protect themselves (ibid.: 179–80). Additionally, in other parts of pre-colonial Southeast Asia, although it was perhaps possible “for those of some means to bribe their way out of conscription ... [,] the surest way of avoiding the military draft was to move out of [the locus of direct state power] and away from the army’s route of the march” (ibid.: 148). Moreover, beyond the threat of conscription, civilian noncombatants also suffered during times of war. As Scott (ibid.: 147) writes, “the major threat from incessant wars was, in the manpower starved kingdoms, not so much of being killed, rather [it] was the utter devastation visited on those who lay athwart the line of march ... the danger of being captured or else having to flee and abandon everything to the army.” War, rebellion or resistance was dangerous because an unsuccessful campaign could result in slavery or worse at the hands of the conquering army. Even in the case of a successful war or not being directly involved in a war, however, there was no protection from raiding, famines, epidemics, and devastation that tends to accompany war. Additionally, rebellions and small civil wars within the lowland states also terrorized the villagers

even when they did not become full-blown wars. Due to constant warring and rebellion between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century due to the repeated Burmese-Manipur wars, the Kabe–Kabaw Valley, for instance, saw a mass exodus of Chin-Mizo dwellers towards the hills (ibid.: 147)

In addition to raiding and looting perpetrated by the various armies during wartime, people who lived within states, because they tended to settle in particular areas, were ripe targets for raiders and slavers during peaceful times. “For all but the largest court centers,” as Scott (ibid.: 150) writes, “the threat of raids by slavers and/or bandits was a real and present danger.” For instance, “fear of Malay slave raiders in the early colonial period had depopulated many of the coastal areas of Burma and Siam” (ibid.: 150). Interestingly, the hill peoples also raided communities in the valley, looting them periodically or extorting protection money from them (ibid.: 151). For instance, in the Shan states, neither the valley people nor the hill people were safe from the Karenni (Red Karen), who enslaved valley people as well as vulnerable hill people and sold them to the Yons, who then resold them to the Siamese (ibid.: 152).

Another threat of remaining in wet rice-growing valley was exposure to diseases. As grain cultivation often went hand-in-hand with domesticated animals, exposure to zoonotic diseases such as plague, smallpox, tuberculosis, measles, and cholera was tremendous (ibid.: 186). Moving away from grain cultivation and the domestication of farm animals to the hills was, thus, a way for them to protect themselves from these diseases and epidemics (ibid.: 158). The risks of disease were exacerbated during droughts where crops failed (directly or indirectly because of the lack of water) leading to famines (which made people more vulnerable to disease). Moreover, since being state subjects often meant living in crowded spaces, the risk of epidemics associated with valley dwelling was quite high (ibid.: 159). For instance, in the sixteenth century, plague caused by rats “devastated Hanthawaddy in lower Burma, devouring most of its store of grains. As food ran out, people fled” (ibid.: 160).

The potential of religious oppression and persecution was an additional reason for hilliness. While in those times it was difficult to distinguish between political and religious dissent and migration, escaping religious orthodoxy was one of the key reasons for migrating to the hills. In fact, the hills became a place of refuge for not only rebels and defeated armies, but also a large number of banned religious sects (ibid.: 157). In particular, the spiritual nature of Buddhism and the Jataka Tales inspired withdrawing as monks and hermits, in particular for Schismatic sects. In the Shan Hills of Burma, we see one such sect called the *Zawti* sect, which adopted some Shan Buddhist customs after being chased out of Burma in the late nineteenth century (ibid.: 156).

It makes sense, then, that individuals would want to avoid these tremendous costs associated with being subjects of a state. And, not surprisingly, individuals explored several strategies to avoid state oppression. The state-making projects in the Southeast Asia left individuals with three options besides taking to the hills. First, open rebellion was a possibility. This, however, meant openly courting some of the threats that taking to the hills sort to escape. Second, individuals could become the subject of a religious authority essentially trying to find refuge from state power within the state. Third, migration to an adjacent hopefully less oppressive kingdom

was also an option. These options, however, offered only limited benefits, may have proven ineffective and often came at a high cost. Open rebellion was risky and the benefits of being subject to either a religious authority or another state were, at best, limited and, at worst, extremely uncertain, as there was no guarantee during the pre-World War II era that religious authority or the alternative states would be much better than the state that was escaped. Taking to the hills, arguably, offered the highest expected benefits and the lowest costs compared to the other options available.

The main advantages of taking to the hills as opposed to remaining in the valley, rebelling or migrating to another state was that the “military conquest of remote mountainous areas was formidable” (ibid.: 165). Armies attempting pacification in northern Burma and even efforts by their more sophisticated French counterparts in Vietnam, for instance, found it difficult to overcome the geographical obstacles to control the hill tribes (ibid.: 165). The mountains and ravines provided a natural protection even for small groups against large armies. Since political and religious asylum were key reasons for migration to the hills, the geographical immunity that the mountains provided for small nomadic groups was significant. For example, the Igorot deliberately cut off the mountain passes as a measure of defensive warfare and retreated deeper into the hills when threatened (ibid.: 165). Even the hill societies that chose to live closer to lowland settlements with open-land frontiers were able to trade with these settlements and live a prosperous life without the costs of oppressive taxes and forced labor. Additionally, since the hill societies tended to be small and united in their rebellion against the political and religious orthodoxy, hill societies became a fertile ground for cultural and religious individuality and heterodoxy.

The benefits of taking to the hills outweighed the costs associated with no longer being state subjects. Hilliness, at one time at least, was clearly rational. The Hans states pushing the Hans settlers to the hills has been the most persistent trend in the populating of the Zomia region. In particular, the Pyu, Pegu, Nan Chao, Chiang Mai, and many Burmese and Thai states have driven settlers out to the hills in the last few centuries (ibid.: 142). Zomia, however, remains the largest stateless society in the world. Over 80 million people representing hundreds of ethnic groups and speaking several distinct languages live in the mountain region that occupies parts of Burma, China, India, and Bangladesh. Although it certainly made sense that the ancestors of those currently in Zomia took to the hills, it remains an open question whether it still makes sense for these individuals to remain stateless.

### **3 What does “not governed” mean today?**

Although clear benefits accrued to individuals when they “took to the hills,” it is less clear whether or not it remains advantageous for their progeny to remain in the hills. Much has, of course, changed in the last few centuries. And, a great deal has changed in the last 50 years. A key question, then, is why do the people in Zomia remain in Zomia and why does Zomia remain stateless? There are several possible explanations for why hill peoples might remain in the hills as well as why they might remain stateless.

One possible explanation is the traditional view that it is the barbarism and backward culture of the hill which drove them to the hills in the first place and which

keeps them in the hills today. As argued above, however, backwardness is not a compelling explanation of why hill peoples took to the hills in the first place since it is clear that the states they attempted to avoid provided little in the way of benefits and much in the way of costs.

Institutional stickiness is another potential explanation of why Zomia has remained stateless. Though the choice by hill peoples to take to the hills was rational at the time given the costs and benefits they faced, it is possible that hill peoples are not integrated into present day societies because of a certain path dependence that has created institutional stickiness and so the benefits of living in hill society remain high.

According to North (1995), societies are path dependent and it is entirely possible for them to get “stuck in an institutional matrix” that is inappropriate given the current challenges that they face. For instance, it may have made sense for blacks in Africa and the West Indies to have possessed a narrow radius of trust and an external locus of control during colonialism but developing a more extensive radius of trust and an internal locus of control was necessary if they were to prosper once colonialism was overturned (Storr 2002). Admittedly, some individuals and communities failed to make that transformation and so failed to escape from their colonial conditions (*ibid.*). Similarly, hill peoples may be “stuck” in an institutional matrix that celebrates hill society over being state subjects even if the costs of remaining in hill society now outweigh the benefits.

Hill culture, not surprisingly, does support hilliness. Hill people, for instance, commonly describe themselves as the descendants of oppressed valley people who have escaped to the hills. As Scott (2009: 218) describes, the Karen view themselves “as an orphaned and persecuted people.” Likewise, the Akha see themselves “as having once been a rice-growing valley people who were sorely oppressed by Yi-Lolo rulers” (*ibid.*: 228). Additionally, Akha history and cosmology encourages this self-image as a once oppressed people who have since escaped to the hills. Along these lines, there is the story of Dzjawbang, a “would be” Akha king in the thirteenth century who was killed by his people when he instituted a census (*ibid.*: 176). Similarly, the Akha describe the journey to recover a wandering soul and to return it to its body as a descent from the hills into the valley where that soul has been captured and forced into slavery (*ibid.*: 177). Both tales carry the message that the oppression of state in the valley is to be resisted and that the hills are a place of refuge and spiritual wholeness. The Wa, Kachin, and other hill peoples tell similar narratives of their escape from persecution and even slavery in the valley. To be hill people, they maintain, is to be, as the Mongmon chief put it, a “wild” people who are not subject to state rule (*ibid.*: 216).

The hill clans have also developed various cultural and social practices that support hilliness including their attitudes toward community leaders, their embracing of oral as opposed to written traditions and their agricultural practices like subsistence farming, shifting cultivation as well as their choice of crops. For instance, Kachin chiefs, where they existed, were not shown a great deal of respect (*ibid.*: 217). If the Kachin had a problem with their chief they would simply abandon them (*ibid.*: 218) and if chiefs overreached they would be deposed or assassinated (*ibid.*: 217). Likewise, the Lisu have a history of assassinating autocratic headmen (*ibid.*). Similarly, that hill peoples have embraced oral traditions rather than written

histories allows them to carry along precisely the amount of “historical baggage” that they need to support their autonomy while allowing for cultural flexibility. As Scott (*ibid.*: 234) recounts, “the Lisu, aside from insisting that they kill assertive chiefs, have a radically abbreviated oral history.” That hill peoples tend to adopt swiddening, where small plots were cleared for temporary cultivation rather than fixed field irrigated rice farming also supports their ability to remain outside the state’s orbit (*ibid.*: 194). Moreover, hill peoples tend to grow crops like fruits and vegetables with staggered maturities, which are difficult to tax, rather than grains, which can be easily confiscated by state officials.

The agricultural practices and social structures in Zomia are, thus, “state-repelling”. First, the agricultural practices were not geared towards amassing grain and manpower, which made states hesitant to acquire such areas. Second, the lack of manpower, wealth, and grain, from which a state derives its revenue and power, rules out the possibility of an indigenous state from arising. (*ibid.*:178).

Given how thoroughly cultural and social practices are adapted to hilliness, there is reason to believe that path dependence might be an adequate explanation for why hill peoples have remained in the hills. That the “civilized world” that the hill peoples escaped is quite different from the “civilized world” that now exists lends support to the notion that, while taking to the hills was a rational move, remaining in the hills might be an irrational decision. Today, for instance, global life expectancy at birth is about 67 years. Two centuries ago, it was 30 years or less. Moreover, even in civilized state societies in 1800 AD, the average state subject earned \$3 a day and survived on a few pounds of potatoes, a little milk, and occasionally a scrap of meat. Two centuries later, the world supports more than 6.5 times more people and in the richer countries, people earn over \$100 a day (McCloskey 2009). This prosperity is a result of tremendous gains that have resulted from trade, specialization and the growth of markets; an opportunity not available to small nomadic hill societies, who cannot easily participate in global markets. Arguably, the greater the size of the settlements and “civilized” population in areas where property rights are protected and the rule of law prevails, the greater the extent of the market and the greater the opportunity costs of remaining in the hills (Smith 1776).

Admittedly, the countries surrounding Zomia like India and China are not as wealthy on a per capita basis as the richest countries in the world. Moreover, in spite of its recent liberalizations, the Indian economy is still less free than many Western economies and the Chinese political system is much more restrictive than Western polities. Still, nation states around the globe and in the region are less oppressive and arguably more liberal today than they were at the periods where individuals were taking to the hills. Additionally, many deadly diseases like plague and smallpox have been eradicated in most of the developed and even developing world. Additionally, in several of the states surrounding Zomia, the extent and consequences of religious intolerance and certainly the probability of having to endure raiders is much less today than it was two centuries ago. Arguably, the costs faced by individuals in the state societies surrounding Zomia today are, on an average, lower than those faced by the ancestors of those currently in Zomia faced when they left the state. Further, the benefits of greater freedom, literacy, healthcare, and infrastructure in most civilized societies are far greater than they were in the past. Also, participating in global markets with current technology not only improves the quality of life of participants



but also expands the opportunity sets available them. Due to their remote and often inaccessible locations and the diversity of heterodox languages that exists within Zomia, hill peoples have no immediate access to global markets while remaining outside the purview of the state. Because global trade depends on enforcement of contracts, in a world of states, it is also difficult to be stateless and enjoy the large benefits of global trade.

If it is true that the benefits of “taking to the hills” have decreased over time and the costs of “remaining in the hills” have increased over time, then it might be the case that the costs of being in Zomia or Zomia remaining stateless now outweigh the benefits for many of the inhabitants. If the costs and benefits of remaining in the hills have in fact changed and hill peoples employed the same cost-benefit analysis that Scott uses to explain their movement to the hills, we should expect a mass exodus back to at least the most liberal and prosperous surrounding states.

A potential explanation for why we do not see this mass exodus that does not rely on barbarism or institutional stickiness, however, is that the costs and benefits of remaining stateless have not changed enough to change the calculus of those in Zomia and that there are still very high socio-economic disadvantages to remaining in the state and relatively few advantages to doing so. Unfortunately, this is an area that is inadequately explored or explained in Scott’s work.

Although Scott does not answer this question directly, however, he does offer some important clues as to why we do not see a massive return to states by those in Zomia. First, the world has not changed as drastically as it might appear, at least not during the period that Scott has focused on and not in the areas that the hill peoples would likely inhabit if they assimilated into surrounding states.

Second, while people do continue to take to the hills, we do see some movement away from Zomia and back to the valley. As Scott (*ibid.*: 332) explains, “valley runaways have been replenishing the hill population for as long as we can tell. Hill people have been assimilating into valley-state societies also for as long as we can tell. ... [There has been] quite massive traffic back and forth in each direction.” Moreover, while hill peoples have avoided becoming state subjects, they have sometimes maintained formal relationships with states that have, however, allowed them to maintain their autonomy (*ibid.*: 330). There are, thus, alternatives to becoming state subjects and there are still reasons to take to and remain in the hills.

Third, we do observe quite significant changes in Zomia in recent years. As Scott (*ibid.*: 325) confesses, “in the past half-century or so ... the combination of technical prowess and sovereign ambitions has so compromised even the relative autonomy of Zomian populations that my analysis here has far less applicability to the situation after the Second World War.” The hill peoples remained outside the orbit of state power at a time when the issues that drove them to the hills were still present. As the relative benefits and costs of remaining in the hills began to change, so did the relative statelessness of the Zomians. Although Scott does not focus on the rationality of remaining in the hills, his framework is able to explain it.

What stands out in Scott’s discussion of Zomia is that, until the Second World War, the emergence and perseverance of the hill peoples is neither an historical accident nor is it a result of barbarism or the persistence of informal institutions and social structures that are no longer appropriate given the contemporary challenges of the people in Zomia. Instead, taking to and remaining in the hills was a systematic



and rational choice that millions of people made in their effort to leave the purview of the oppressive state. As Scott concedes, post the Second World War, Zomia's relative statelessness has declined as the costs and benefits of remaining in the hills have changed.

#### 4 Conclusions

Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) complicates the traditional story of the rise of civilization over barbarism. As Scott highlights, the efforts at state making which accompanied the spread of civilization were not benign but were accompanied by taxes and forced labor, war and rebellion, raiding and slaving, disease, and religious oppression. While many in pre-colonial Southeast Asia became state subjects and so suffered from state oppression, some escaped to the hills. As Scott describes, these hill peoples developed cultures and have evolved social practices that facilitate hilliness. For instance, Zomians (sometimes violently) resist autocratic leaders and have self-images that celebrate their statelessness.

Although Scott's analysis does an excellent job of articulating the rationality of taking to the hills, unfortunately, it does not address several key questions. First, it does not pay enough attention to the rationality of remaining in the hills in the present day. Although Scott acknowledges that Zomia's relative statelessness has declined since World War II, Zomia remains a fairly large and mostly stateless area. Is remaining in the hills (post-World War II), however, rational?

Second, Scott's analysis does not explain whether or not modernity (specifically the advantages of modern technology and modern markets) is compatible with statelessness. The Zomia engage in subsistence farming and small-scale trade with their neighbors in the valleys. Neither will lead to prosperity. Does anarchy for Scott, then, necessarily mean poverty? Is poverty the price that the Zomians have to pay for escaping state power? It is, thus, unclear what we should make of Scott's discussion of anarchy. Unfortunately, the story of Zomia may just be an interesting tale of why and how a particular group of people remained stateless rather than a general discussion of the net benefits of being stateless. While Scott's work adds an important case study to the literature on the political economy of anarchy, it does not really tackle the biggest puzzle. Statelessness can emerge as individuals develop private institutional arrangements to cooperate and trade. Most examples of such stateless arrangements can be seen in small and homogenous communities where the reputation and social sanction encourage cooperation (Benson 1988; Ellickson 1986; Leeson 2009). However, many scholars also suggest that these cooperative institutional arrangements break down when the exchange is scaled up to include heterogeneous members that are large (Dixit 2003; Greif 1989). With the exception of a very few political economists (e.g., Friedman 1973 and Rothbard 1973), the majority opinion has recognized the need for formal governments to facilitate cooperation and trade (Buchanan 1975 and Cowen 1992).

In this context, Scott's work is important as the people of Zomia represent the case of small homogenous tribes who have remained stateless over the years and have created private institutional arrangements that facilitate their living in the hills.

The key question in the statelessness literature, however, is whether or not it is possible to show theoretically and empirically how stateless societies can generate large-scale economic growth once the group size and its heterogeneity increase (Leeson 2006). Although Zomia represents the largest stateless area in the world, it is unclear that the hill peoples who live there can grow their “economies” beyond subsistence levels.

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