Debate


James Scott, in keeping with his long-standing practice, has chosen not to react to the reviews. The editor regrets that the author of *The art of not being governed*, reviewers, and editor have had different expectations of this discussion, but respects the decision of the author. The comments of Michael Dove, Hjorleifur Jonsson, and Michael Aung-Thwin are worth to be published also without a response by James Scott.

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Escaping the state? Scott on Southeast Asia

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (Walter Benjamin 1974.)

In contrast to his previous and highly influential 1998 book, *Seeing like a state*, James C. Scott presents *The art of not being governed* as being not about state-making but the opposite, ‘the history of deliberate and reactive statelessness’ (p. x). Scott characterizes this new book, focused specifically on mainland Southeast Asia, as an attempt to de-naturalize its hill societies, to interpret their distinctive character as a consequence of social and historical choices by its peoples to distance themselves from the lowland states. This is only partly about geography and topography. The state-resistant spaces in the uplands are not just places on a map, Scott argues, but positions vis-à-vis state power. The distinctive features of hill societies – their agriculture, religion, social structure, virtually every aspect of life – should be interpreted, Scott argues, as mechanisms for ‘escaping’ lowland state authority. The ‘rude’ character of the hill societies do not reflect a condition of being ‘left behind’, but instead represent ‘secondary

1 Thanks are due to the students in the seminar Disaster, Degradation, and Dystopia: Social Science Approaches To Environmental Perturbation and Change, in Spring 2011 in Yale’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, with whom the author read and discussed *The art of not being governed* in a memorable class that greatly stimulated his thinking about the book.
primitivism’ or ‘barbarism by design’, both of which are ‘state effects’ (p. 8). The character of upland society is the antithesis of the civilized ideal – to be a subject of a lowland *padi* kingdom – promulgated by the lowland states. The political choice of this upland antithesis, through self-marginalization, self-barbarism, and ‘dissimilation’, is literally unthinkable within the civilizing discourse of the lowland states – and yet, Scott maintains, it was a choice that tens of millions of people made over the last several centuries in Southeast Asia.

Scott’s works are famous for their additions to our analytic lexicon: weapons of the weak, moral economy, and so on. One such evocative term in the current work is ‘friction’ (see Tsing 2005). Scott uses the term to refer to the relative ease versus difficulty for the lowland state in negotiating the upland social and physical landscape. Seasonal monsoons, for example, practically bring state movement to a halt. Of most interest is Scott’s point that the degree of friction on the landscape is not just there, it is engineered. The lowland state works to decrease it, whereas the upland societies work to increase it (p. 166). A major mechanism for increasing friction involves choice of agricultural system: the upland societies do not practice the irrigated rice cultivation of the lowlands, which is highly legible to, and thus exploitable by, the lowland states. Instead, they practice swidden agriculture which, with its dispersed fields, multifarious crops, and staggered harvest times, is highly illegible. Swidden agriculture, which Scott says is ‘fiscally sterile’ from the standpoint of a lowland state, is the ‘friction of appropriation’ (pp. 6, 193).

**Upland-lowland distinctions**

A key part of Scott’s argument rests on his comparative analysis of upland and lowland systems of agriculture. His thesis is that the inherent character of agricultural systems, and even certain types of crops, are predisposed to facilitate versus frustrate state surveillance, control, and extraction. He offers a telling analysis of roots and tubers, for example as being ‘appropriation-proof’ – a rare example of the application of ‘staple theory’ in a historical, political study (p. 195). Scott’s analysis of the state-frustrating character of swidden agriculture is certainly correct, although his suggestion that upland peoples choose it largely because of this character, as opposed to the simple fact that it is less onerous (given its high returns per unit labour) is a little more problematic. His political analysis does not explain, for example, the persistence of swidden cultivation in Western and Northern Europe, and also in the United States, well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Otto and Anderson 1982; Sigaut 1979; Weimarck 1968). Like others before him (Burling 1965; Geertz 1963), Scott somewhat essentializes the divide between swidden agriculture on the one hand and on the other hand irrigated rice cultivation. He acknowledges but
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does not completely reconcile with his analysis the fact that the two types of fields are often cultivated at the same time by the same peoples, in the uplands as well as lowlands, in a pattern that has ancient roots in the region (Day1994).

One of the most creative chapters in *The art* involves a re-thinking of the characterization of uplands and lowlands as respectively pre-literate and literate. Scott suggests that the ubiquitous myths among upland peoples in the region of having once possessed but ‘lost’ literacy are structurally correct, in the sense that peoples escaping into the uplands from lowland states did not bring literacy with them, because ‘fixed texts’ did not support the construction of non-state spaces. Scott could actually have pushed this analysis even further, because many of these ‘lost literacy’ myths contain within them references to upland-lowland patterns of ethnicity, resource-use, and population movement that directly support his over-arching thesis of ‘barbarism by design’.² If we grant that the dis-acquisition of literacy and history served upland peoples in keeping beyond the reach of the state, a question that remains to be asked is what this cost them (for example, in being seen as a ‘people without history’) when the state eventually caught up with them?

The distinction between uplands and lowlands is always, in part, one of ethnicity, which, Scott maintains, begins where state sovereignty ends. This argument is consistent with much of the current thinking about indigenous identity, which is seen as being forged in opposition to metropolitan identity and even as relying on modernity for its articulation (Hirtz 2003; Li 2008). The ubiquitous concepts of ‘raw’ versus ‘cooked’ for upland versus lowland society imply an irreversible relationship – an uplander can become a lowlander but not the reverse, although movement in both directions was equally common – which is also seen as being true of indigenous status – you can lose but not acquire indigenous status. This directionality was demanded by the lowland civilizing discourse.

As with ethnicity, Scott suggests that without the lowland state there were no tribes. He argues that you cannot understand upland peoples in isolation, as ‘tribes’, which is consistent with a generation of anthropological scholarship, beginning with Wolf (1982). But to argue that tribes as such never existed but are only creations of the state, raises the questions whether tribes don’t sometimes make tribes, as the work of scholars like Barth (2008) suggests.

² For example, see this story from the aboriginal Batek – one of the orang asli groups of whom Scott writes – of the Malay Peninsula:

In the beginning, all bangsa? ‘races, ethnic groups’ were the same. All were Batek. One day, Adam, Tohan’s younger brother, set fire to the lalang ‘grass, weeds’ where the Batek were living….One family fled into the forest. They left behind their surat kitab ‘religious books or papers’. … Another family was near the riverbank. They jumped into the river and took the surat kitab with them downriver towards the sea. These became the Malays. The Batek looked for their surat kitab but the Malays had hidden them. This is why the Malays pray now. So the surat kitab belonged to the Batek first. (Lye 2004.)
Scott sees uplands and lowlands as mirror images of one another, both produced as ‘state effects’. The latter is a zone of uniformity and ‘hyperappropriation’; the former is a zone of heterodoxy and minimal appropriation. Scott calls the uplands the ‘shadow’, ‘nightmare’, and ‘dark twin’ of the lowlands (pp. 326-7). This characterization notwithstanding, he takes pains to say that the two zones are ‘in dialogue’, are in ‘symbiosis’ with one another (pp. 108, 182) – but this dimension of the relationship seems over-shadowed in his analysis by the antagonistic elements. Thus, Scott devotes considerable attention to the slave trade between uplands and lowlands, but less to the more ancient and far-reaching trade in non-timber forest products, which has been a defining feature of upland society in Southeast Asia throughout recorded history (Dove 2011). In the nineteenth century in Borneo, for example, movement of tribal populations in the interior was governed much less by desire to escape the state than by desire to exploit stands of natural rubber for global markets in gutta percha, caoutchouc, and jelutong (Dove 2011). Scholars like Guérin (2001) have argued that upland-lowland trade in the region was so important that the two zones need to be seen as part of a single economic system. Also perhaps meriting further development is the idea that the two zones constituted a single cultural system, in which each needed the ‘other’ to construct and maintain its identity.

The state

Scott presents this work as a history of non- or anti-state formation, which he rationalizes by saying that the absence of the state has largely characterized the human condition. But as a study of people avoiding or being extruded by the state, this book is in some sense still largely a study of the state. At one point Scott says that whereas the upland is a state effect, the lowlands are a hill effect (p. 28), but his emphasis is clearly on the former. In characterizing as a state-avoiding adaptation every aspect of upland society – location, mobility, swidden agriculture, social structure, religion, egalitarianism, oral culture (p. 9) – questions could be raised about the extent to which this was cognized and intentional, as well as questions about the extent to which this is projecting, in retrospect, a pattern onto more fractious historical developments.

As a by-product of their state-avoiding behavior, as Scott himself notes, upland cultures have left us few written records. Non-state, vernacular histories lie beyond our reach (although there may be more that could be done with oral histories), which raises the now familiar question whether the subaltern can speak here? Scott is to some extent trapped by state histories, which may – given the bias of their own civilizing discourse – exaggerate the determinate role of the lowlands in the uplands. Give the likelihood of this bias,
one might have wished if more quantitative data on upland-lowland relations (for example, their trade) could have been drawn from these histories.

Scott severely limits – perhaps overly so – the applicability and relevance of his analysis. He says that his model of upland-lowland relations applies only up to the mid-twentieth century, after which state development markedly decreased the ‘friction’ to its extension of power into the uplands of Southeast Asia and, indeed, as the entire globe became an administered space. On the other hand, Scott’s analysis aptly describes continued state resistance in the region and elsewhere to swidden agriculture, for example; and it also seems applicable to the emergence of indigenous identity and identity politics in tribal territories around the world, including in Southeast Asia. Upland-lowland relations in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan still seem to be following Scott’s model. Viewing state relations more abstractly, the emergence of back-to-the-land social movements, drug cartel territories, and even virtual realities all could be read in Scott’s terms as state effects and secondary barbarism. The same could be said of the unanticipated ‘gaps’ that some scholars have discerned in globalization (Ferguson 2006). As the shape of the state has evolved and changed, so too of necessity has the shape of state escape, but the underlying dynamics still look quite similar to Scott’s model.

In the end, the most telling point that one can make about *The art of not being governed* is that no one who has read it will be able to think in the same way about the uplands of Southeast Asia again. It is a wonderful book, sweeping in scope, much of it lyrically written, and provocative from beginning to end.

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States lie, and stories are tools: Following up on Zomia

The highland peoples of mainland Southeast Asia have gone from a former tribal zone of interest to a few eccentrics to a must-read example of the last enclosure; the ultimate showdown between the ever-expanding state and peoples who had long got away. This happened with Scott’s *The art of not being governed*. The book brings Southeast Asian highland areas into interdisciplinary conversations about history, states, marginality, and much else, as it creates grounds for debate. After several readings and some conference panels, I relate to the book as I would any field-site: It is more my line of work to make something out of it than to take sides. There may be more to learn from state-highlander interactions than what Scott has already drawn out. So, presuming to comment on a grand vista that he has drawn with flair, I propose to follow up on two things that Scott has taught us already – states lie, and stories are tools.

States lie, but how and why is varied. Modern nation states insist on the selective incorporation of minorities, while pre-nation-states insisted on separation. Both are lies, in a way, but they are different. Scott’s case may lead us to assume that all states have been like the aggressive and anxious nation state; Zomians take shape as people whose agriculture, social life, mobility, and religious ferment served to repel or evade state control until they were done out of options by about 1950. There are documented cases of slave-raids into the hills, and some of enforced taxation, but for the most part the historical record for Southeast Asia and adjacent China indicates policies of exclusion and selective discrimination. The people who have entered historical records and ethnography as hinterland minorities were those whose exclusion was integral to the social project of the state.

An historical juxtaposition of the Yao on China’s southern edges and the Lawa around Shan and Northern Thai areas suggests this much (Jonsson 2005:16-40), but I had no-one to engage with on the matter and just wrote into the wind. It is possible that people have not noticed the fundamental shift from policies of exclusion to inclusion because not many have Scott’s curiosity or historical reach. Modern nation states may have successfully led us to believe that they are carrying on a legacy that goes back a millennium or more. This is plain misrepresentation, but a strategic one; the legitimacy of modern rulers is tied to notions of national heritage and historical transcendence.

A further dimension concerns hinterland ethnicities. The labels we know, and which became the focus of much twentieth-century highland ethnog-
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raphy, were the equivalent of rank in relation to the state. The reference involved state regulation of settlement, service duties, and taxes. Archival sources repeatedly insist on separation, that there cannot be, say, marriages between highlanders andlowlanders. In some places there were particular rituals of separation that insisted on the absolute distinction of the two.

Are there reasons for the rhetorical insistence on the exclusion of highlanders, given what we can tell about the frequent trade relations? One is social and commonplace; any identity has ideological notions of its distinctness. Another concerns logics of power and inequality; states base their power and legitimacy on temporal assertions. Their others are ‘uncivilized’ or ‘less evolved’. Modernism, suggests Carol Greenhouse (1996:218), ‘refers productively to any temporal representation that involves the simultaneous assertion and management of difference as core functions of state institutions’. Insisting that different and uncivilized people live in the forested wilderness, Chinese and Southeast Asian states repeatedly took ideological shape as the guardians of this boundary and as the source of people’s identity-as-rank.

Many cases of violence and ritual served to assert state power and ethnic difference. Highland peoples did not need strategies of state evasion; they were actively kept out or denied recognition. The exclusion is a historical fact that state ideologies may erase from view. The highland-lowland divide is not a guide to the historical landscape as much as an expression of ideology that appears natural because we can tell the difference between forested hinterlands and cleared plains. It spells out the state’s mission as it defines the state and who belong there.

Stories are tools. Scott (1985) writes of weapons but an allusion to ploughshares is justifiable. The Mien people I have worked with in northern Thailand formalized their relations with the state starting in roughly the 1880s, having had relations elsewhere before then. But Thai notions of themselves made such realities repeatedly unthinkable. Categorical notions of Mountain People and the like systemically erase certain social realities. Anthropologists (including myself) are partly to blame for the expectation of some fundamental divide and antagonism between highland and lowland peoples. We have absorbed certain social biases and generalized from them for the timeless shape of the region, through our plotting of kinds of people. Something similar happens with the focus on creolization in the Caribbean, that brings with it an inability to recognize South Asians except as outsiders; they simply do not fit national narratives and the resulting scholarship manifests a particular ‘epistemological collapse’ (Munasinghe 2006).

Can we tell different stories? One of Scott’s creative interventions is the re-evaluation of highland ways as strategies with important political consequences rather than as expressions of ethnic culture or the lack of progress. While some ethnographers may be skeptical, this can also be taken in stride.
as a license to reconsider what constitutes politics. In my research area, people have been putting on festivals focused on sports, ethnic culture, and cash crop harvests. Such dynamics do not get much scholarly notice because they seem apolitical, frivolous, or caught up in engagements with state and markets. But by paying some attention, I have come to see their potential for creating grounds for political dialogue and various claims to recognition.

Because Thai authorities view highland ethnic groups with political suspicion, only ostensibly apolitical and expressly fun events can create avenues for changing people’s situation. Showing up to give speeches or awards and to be treated as VIPs, provincial and national dignitaries avail themselves to negotiation; they need applause and a feel for their power. This is not general for either the state or highland peoples. Rather, somewhat like the stories people told in Sedaka (Scott 1985), it is an indication that official realities or archival records can be a poor guide to what goes on. There is on-going interaction among people with different interests in highly particular settings where much depends on words that may compel generosity and a sense of mutual benefit. If stories are tools, we need to know the people who tell them. It is doubtful that any one narrative is representative of a village or ethnic group, or of highland peoples. Can we imagine similar diversity within what we call the state?

From recent conversations with people caught up in war in Laos until 1975, I find that leaders and followers and men and women may have different interests and experiences and tell different stories (Jonsson 2009). These are never just stories, but also attempts to engage with the world and perhaps influence what interactions and outcomes are possible. One person’s weapon may be another’s ploughshare, and having some cases to think that against can make all the difference. The art of not being governed is a challenge and an invitation; to reconsider history and region, and to examine what possibilities and whose stories lie in our concepts.

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**A non-state approach**

I have been asked to contribute to a debate in the present journal on Jim Scott’s most recent work, *The art of not being governed*. I agreed, but since Victor Lieberman has already published a thoughtful and detailed critique of it, the current essay will focus on two categories of issues that the book raises regarding Burma’s history, one dealing with evidence, and the other, analysis.

No one in Southeast Asian studies needs to be convinced of Jim Scott’s contribution to the field in terms of theory. His *Moral economy of the peasant*, *Weapons of the weak*, *Domination and the arts of resistance* and *Seeing like a state* are not only integral parts of Southeast Asia scholarship, but have introduced the latter into mainstream Western scholarship in ways only some have been able to do successfully: the late Clifford Geertz and Paul Wheatley, Melford Spiro, Ben Anderson, Vic Lieberman, Tony Reid, to mention a few.

There is a common theme in all of Scott’s scholarship: the giving of ‘agency’ to the ‘periphery’ – the peasant, the rural, the non-state components. In the present work under discussion as well, ‘agency’ is given to the hill-farms, ethnic minorities, the non-state areas, along with their peoples, cultures, histories, and ways of doing things.

I see no intrinsic problem in taking such a position. However, for us historians, it must be supported by primary evidence – dated, original, and contemporary records – otherwise, it is only argument. The main question I ask, therefore, is whether or not the primary evidence supports Scott’s characterization of Burma’s ‘Zomia’ and its attributed relationships with the centre.

First, can a ‘Zomia’ of Burma during the pre-colonial period even be reconstructed from the primary evidence? These non-state regions produced little or no written records until the nineteenth, and in some cases, the twentieth-centuries, when their languages were, for the first time, put into writing. And what little there was earlier belonged to the centre, reflecting it and its concerns, not that of ‘Zomia’. Similarly, the Chinese records regarding these areas of Burma: they are exogenous and centre-oriented. What is left are late English-language ethnographies compiled by the British, travelogues by the...
occasional European visitor, missionary accounts, and modern social science studies. These are, of course, anachronistic to the era on which the book is focused. In other words, there is precious little information in the primary, indigenous sources that can be used to accurately reconstruct pre-colonial Burma’s ‘Zomia’. So if it is the latter’s ‘voice’ Scott is keen in representing, I’m afraid it hasn’t been heard.

Instead, what we have in Scott’s work is a re-creation based on published, secondary English language works that are far removed in time and space from the subject matter, while the theoretical works cited to support the idea of ‘Zomia’, address even less the issue of original evidence. In other words, the ‘Zomia’ of pre-colonial Burma exists mainly in Scott’s mind (and now, also in his book, henceforth to be cited as ‘evidence’).

If the historicity of Burma’s ‘Zomia’ itself cannot be documented by primary evidence, how can we be confident that the characteristics attributed to it, and its alleged relationships with the centres, are also viable? I am thinking particularly of one fundamental component of Scott’s thesis: the issue of population ‘leakage’ from the centres to the periphery – my second point.

He argues that people in pre-colonial Southeast Asia had the propensity to flee the centres to the periphery, to get away from the oppression of state-making projects in the valleys. Leaving aside for a moment the question of how Scott knows the motives of people who moved a millennium ago, the bulk of the primary evidence that represents pre-colonial Burma (and Mainland Southeast Asian) history suggests just the opposite scenario in any case: people moved toward the centres, not away from them.

Under ordinary circumstances, centres in early Southeast Asia tended to attract rather than repel people, and mainly, for socio-economic reasons. For example, Pagan and Ava attracted people because labour was paid, not slave (if such an institution even existed in early Burma). The highest wages – normally in gold and silver kyat as well as other valuables – went to those with occupations directly and indirectly related to the huge temple-construction industry, which, in turn, was the main economic engine for the development of the kingdom.

The centres also financed important religious and agrarian-based folk festivals on a regular basis, plus other socio-cultural activities that, in scope and scale, could not have been matched by any non-state area. Thousands of monks in thousands of monasteries at the centres taught the ‘Three R’s’ to the public, whose literacy is documented by the large number of inscriptions written by ordinary folk that outnumber (by a ratio of 1-3) those belonging to the elite. Apart from their educational functions where students were awarded with scholarships that cover room and board, monasteries were also society’s ‘human services’ networks where the aged and the orphaned, along with anyone who was destitute were assured of free housing, food, and a sense of
belonging to a social community. All this was supported by land and labour endowments made to the sangha by religious devotees, both state and private.

Exemplary centres in Burma such as Pagan could also claim to have some of the most holy temples in the Buddhist world, enshrined with some of the most sacred bodily-relics of the Buddha, that, for centuries attracted domestic and foreign pilgrims to the capital. The latter could also boast the presence of some of the most internationally renowned monks and the leading masters of literature, dance, theatre, and music in the country. Shin Thilawuntha, who became one of Burma’s most exemplary literary figures, left his humble village at the invitation of the king of Ava to write, preach, and reside at the capital. This sort of movement from rural village to capital illustrates the attraction the centres had; not the repellant imagined by Scott.

Centres also appealed to people with military, administrative, and legal skills who moved up the socio-political ladder by joining the ranks of prestigious crown service groups (ahmudan). Centres also offered the best agricultural land on which cultivators could settle, much of which already contained state-sponsored irrigation works, thus obviating the need for emigrants to clear jungle or otherwise start from scratch.

In short, centres had the wherewithal to provide the kinds of opportunities that ‘Zomia’ could not and did not have, hence the reason people tended to gravitate toward the ‘bright lights of the cities’ rather than away from them.

And for those already living at these centres, why would they want to move to the bundok under normal circumstances anyway? Why would experienced ministers, educated scribes, spoiled princes and ‘high-maintenance’ princesses, renowned scholars, respected monks, skilled cavalry and elephantry officers, famous artists, expert craftsmen, and rich merchants want to move to the ‘sticks’? Even the farmer with commoner status would have little reason to leave. Tied to his land in psychological, social, and economic ways, it was much better developed and provided a much higher yield than he could eke out in the hills, and for which there was continuous and predictable demand. There is no evidence, in any case, that cultivators left their lands for the hills. In fact, it appears to have been just the reverse: cultivated land saw a threefold increase in less than two centuries during the Pagan period alone.

‘Pull’ factors can also explain much better how and why centres/states such as Pagan and Angkor accumulated huge concentrations of people – despite rampant death and disease in early Southeast Asia – than arguments about coercion or conquest can, which, in any case, occurred infrequently and was much less reliable as a means of acquiring significant amounts of people in any sustained manner. (In the four hundred years of the Pagan dynasty, there is only one, very late record of conquest that was said to have brought back labour to the centre from the periphery, whereas we know from contemporary inscriptions that continuous emigration from ‘pull’ factors increased...
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the size of the capital six-fold in two centuries.)

Similarly, in subsequent years, Burma conquered Ayutthaya only three times in five centuries (twice in the sixteenth and once in the eighteenth), something that can hardly be considered a typical or reliable method for replenishing (what convention has long deemed) severe labour shortages in early Southeast Asia. And although labour was indeed brought back from these three conquests, that doesn’t mean labour acquisition was the cause, rather than the consequence of these conquests. Other economic and political reasons appear far more important as causal factors. Ayutthaya was not only Lower Burma’s main competitor in terms of trade and commerce in this region at the time, but also its political and ideological rival. After all, there can be only one cakravartin ruling one Jambudipa.

Besides, these conquests were not of ‘Zomia’ but of another centre, so cannot be used as evidence for Scott’s arguments concerning alleged labor raids of ‘Zomia’. Indeed, the latter would not have provided as lucrative a return on the investment as a populated centre like Ayutthaya would have, not only with regard to the quantity but also quality of labour obtained. Why march on poor, distant, sparsely populated, and difficult-to-reach ‘Zomia’ enclaves when Ayutthaya was easier to get to and provided much more booty of far better quality? Indeed, Pegu and Ava brought back not just many people; they were also highly skilled – militarily, artistically, literarily, administratively. Raiding ‘Zomia’ simply did not pay; but raiding another centre did.

Other ‘push’ factors – even crises and war – cannot be supported with the evidence we have. For during such times, people fled the capital to other (provincial) centres, not to the hills. When the Mongols threatened the Pagan Kingdom twice in the late thirteenth century and once again in the early fourteenth, people fled to nearby myosaships such as Prome and Moksobo. When Ava was taken by Sawbwas in 1527 people who fled went to Prome, Toungoo, Pyinmana (adjacent to today’s capital of Naypyidaw), and other fortified towns close by. When Mrauk-U (in Arakan) took Pegu in 1599 (helped by Ayutthaya) refugees migrated to Upper Burma or were taken back to Mrauk-U (and Ayutthaya). And when a rejuvenated Pegu took Ava in 1752, most fled to Shwebo, Prome, and other nearby towns.

These provincial centres were usually within a few days march of one another, and most were fortified with high brick walls, moats, and other defensive measures. They provided much better security for refugees, their locations were easily accessible and well known, and they were part of the same polity, therefore under the same laws, shared the same language and culture, notions of authority and power, food and dress, religion and other beliefs. Why trek to the hills and unknown territory, to peoples whose languages one did not understand and cultures with which one was unfamiliar, and where one’s socio-economic future was unknown?
Apart from the evidence, there are problems of analysis in the book. First, the notion that people must have wanted to flee to the periphery despite the many material and emotional benefits available at the centres rests on the assumption that a. their motives must have been ideological rather than material, and b. that this ‘ideology’ had to have been one of freedom versus tyranny – a modern populist philosophy. The burning desire for individual political freedom pre-empted everything else in life?

That it did to Scott, comes out clearly in his statement that even social organization can be interpreted as ‘strategic positioning’ against the state. (I wonder how anthropologists might respond to such an explanation for the origins of social organization.) It implies a political motive and cause for just about everything, one of many problems when political scientists attempt to ‘do’ history; indeed, the heart of the problem with this study.

Second, positioning the periphery against the centre in such a fashion creates a (false) dichotomy between people living in lowland villages and towns, and those living in the hills, so that ‘the art of not being governed’ becomes a desire and skill possessed only by those living in the bundok; as if townspeople did not want, or know how to evade taxes or mitigate state dominance with ‘everyday forms of passive resistance’. This binary model forces the periphery to exist only in opposition to the centre rather than in terms of it. Underlying all this celebration of the periphery appears to be sentiments reminiscent of the ‘noble savage’, ‘Walden Pond’, and ‘folk wisdom’ (or as Scott put it elsewhere, ‘local knowledge’).

As stated in the beginning of this essay, on a theoretical level, this book will once again contribute to the study of and debate about Southeast Asia as Scott’s other books have done. As a non-state, alternative approach to assessing (or re-assessing) early Southeast Asian history, however, it is not viable.