State, Power, Anarchism

A Discussion of *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*

The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia. By James C. Scott. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 464p. $35.00.

The book under discussion is James C. Scott's latest contribution to the study of agrarian politics, culture, and society, and to the ways that marginalized communities evade or resist projects of state authority. The book offers a synoptic history of Upland Southeast Asia, a 2.5 million–kilometer region of hill country spanning Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and China. It offers a kind of "area study." It also builds on Scott's earlier work on "hidden transcripts" of subaltern groups and on "seeing like a state." The book raises many important theoretical questions about research methods and social inquiry, the relationship between political science and anthropology, the nature of states, and of modernity more generally. The book is also deeply relevant to problems of "state-building" and "failed states" in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. As Scott writes, "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 it an anarchist history" (p. x).

In this symposium, I have invited a number of prominent political and social scientists to comment on the book, its historical narrative, and its broader theoretical implications for thinking about power, state failure, state-building, and foreign policy. How does the book shed light on the limits of states and the modes of resistance to state authority? Are there limits, theoretical and normative, to this "anarchist" understanding of governance and the "art of being governed"?—Jeffrey C. Isaac, Editor

Stephen D. Krasner
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In the movie *Winter's Bone* the protagonist, a teenage girl living in Appalachia, must show the authorities that her father, who has been released on bond, is dead lest she forfeit the bond and lose the property that houses her invalid mother and two younger siblings. She succeeds by convincing members of the clan that killed him for cooperating with the police to allow her to cut off the two hands from the cadaver as evidence of his demise. On a trip to Guatemala while I was working for the State Department, I was told that around 40% of the indigenous population does not speak Spanish. In a Berber town in Morocco in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains about 20 miles from the major tourist city of Marrakech, the Berber woman serving tea and cakes to tourists from her house spoke (according to our guide) quite poor Arabic. Some Berbers, something less than half of the Moroccan population, do not speak any Arabic at all. My initial way of understanding all three of these situations, both the one fictional and two real, was that they reflected the failure of the state to extend its reach.

The Art of Not Being Governed changed how I have thought about these incidents and much else in political life, something that I can say about only very few books that I have read. James C. Scott is the un-Hobbes. He does not simply celebrate the virtues of what we generally regard as primitive societies; he rejects the conventional wisdom that these societies are primitive at all, seeing them, rather, as a reaction against and superior to states, at least most states for most of human history. On this reading of history, organized states have not provided a better life than swiddening and foraging groups. The invention of agriculture did not improve the condition of humankind. People consciously abandon literacy, reject the universal

Stephen D. Krasner is Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations and Senior Fellow of the Freeman Spogli Institute and Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

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religion endorsed by local rulers, and cling to their own dialects, and they are better off for it. Guatemalan Indians and Moroccan Berbers have chosen not to speak the dominant language. Appalachian clans have preferred the freedom of the hills to the ostensible lawfulness of the state.

To understand how human beings have organized their political lives throughout most of human history, we must strip off the blinders that Hobbes has placed upon us. Life is not nasty, brutish, and short in the state of nature; just the opposite. In the state of nature—or rather in the small acephalous Southeast Asian mountain-dwelling groups that are the focus of Scott's empirical presentation, and in other areas throughout the world on the periphery of state control—individuals are free, equal, and healthy, or at least healthier than they would be if they were living in close proximity to animals and other people in lowland rice states. He provides the following quotation from a forestry officer on his first visit to a highland Javanese village: "You couldn't tell rich from poor. Everyone spoke in the same way. . . . No one bent down and bowed before others" (p. 135).

Oppression, slavery, hierarchy, arbitrary power, disease, war—all those things that go toward making life nasty brutish and short—are, Scott argues, attributes of states. The padi states of Southeast Asia are characterized by "arbitrary, tyrannical rule that is not institutionalized" (p. 97). Religion is just one more instrument of control, not a shield from political power. In all of the classic states—Athens, Rome, the padi states—power depended on population. Population depended on slaves. Slaves were secured through warfare (p. 85).

For Scott, the standard civilization narrative of impoverished hunter-gathers in the hills being civilized by the state is completely backwards. The swiddening and foraging societies of the hills were populated by people who fled from the state. They were not primitive aboriginals waiting to have the state lift the burden of their ignorance and poverty, but often individuals of the same ethnic stock as lowlanders who had escaped the clutches of corrupt officials and brutal rulers.

To maintain their freedom, hill people adopted a wide range of tactics that made it difficult for padi states to assert control over them. Socially and politically they were organized into fluid acephalous groups, which precluded a decapitating attack by the state. Individuals carried multiple identities, which they could deploy to their advantage in different situations. Groups were widely dispersed geographically in hilly areas that impeded the movement of lowland authorities. They did not have private property, which could be appropriated by the state. In some cases, hill societies abandoned literacy: Writing and records offered the state an avenue for control, whereas oral traditions have been more democratic, available to anyone interested in listening. They rejected the dominant religions supported by the state and, instead, embraced either animism or dissenting creeds. They grew crops that matured quickly, could be hidden, and had low value-to-weight ratios. Southeast Asian hill dwellers were adaptable. For instance, they took advantage of new crops, such as sweet potatoes and corn, which came from the Americas, if these made it easier to avoid the clutches of the state. They accepted new religions, such as Christianity, which provided an alternative to Buddhism or Hinduism. Christianity with the Old Testament story of the Jews' oppression and liberation was particularly attractive. When there have been major rebellions involving hill dwellers, they have been organized by charismatic religious leaders who do not seek to create a permanent institutional structure (pp. 318–19).

For much of history, many humans were able to escape the oppression of states, whose reach was limited by the lack of technology. The oxen pulling a cart of grain taxed by the state would eat their load within 250 kilometers, setting the outer boundaries of the state's ability to appropriate from the land in the absence of water transport (p. 41). The balance of power did not always favor the state. Hill people produced high-value products, such as spices, that were desired by the lowland empires. Small padi states might compete against one another for connections with hill people.

Since 1945, however, the possibility of eluding the state's grasp has been disappearing. The concept of sovereignty has pushed states to extend their control to all of the territory within their geographic borders. The populations of lowland areas have grown. The state has eliminated communal property. Technological change has favored organized political structures, rather than small, acephalous independent groups. Paved roads have opened up areas that the state had not previously been able to reach. Railways have shortened the time of travel. Telephones and telegraph have allowed the state to coordinate its activities across far-flung reaches of space. The Global Positioning System has made it easier to map, and control, activities even in remote areas. Modern weapons have favored the state rather than self-governing groups, making escape from it increasingly difficult. The pattern of the past in which political geography was, in reality, vertical rather than horizontal, where higher areas were, in effect, islands that eluded the control of the state, has virtually disappeared (pp. 324–37).

Even for those polities that have avoided the horrific consequences of state power and utopian ideology, which Scott pointed to in his previous book *Seeing Like a State* (1998), the centralization of state authority has not produced entirely happy results. Human beings are now dependent on the state for protection. Freehold property has generated enormous inequalities. The state has ever more intruded into the lives of its denizens. *The Art of Not Being Governed* is as much a philosophical reflection on the condition of the human race as it is a piece of social science analysis.

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It is not easy to fit Scott's discussion into our contemporary understanding of state development, which has been dominated by three theoretical approaches: modernization theory, institutional capacity, and rational choice institutionalism. All three have sought to explain how democratic well-functioning states have evolved—how Denmark got to be Denmark. Modernization theory contends that political transformation and democratization result from social change and economic growth.[1] Urbanization, higher levels of literacy, and industrialization lead to social mobilization, attitudinal change, and a larger middle class. A larger middle class is more tolerant, more accepting of diverse political perspectives, more willing to compromise, and more likely to reject extremism. Modernization makes individuals more capable of self-expression and eager to engage in political activities. Greater wealth makes it possible for even those at the lower rungs of the economic ladder to adopt a longer time horizon. In a more complex social and political environment inhabited by a better-educated population, cross-cutting cleavages become more important. Class conflict is mitigated. Democracy is not the result of some special set of cultural attributes possessed only by the West, but rather is a product of social and economic transformation.[2]

For analysts emphasizing the importance of institutional capacity, the critical distinguishing feature of polities is their ability to actually govern. Hobbes is the ur-source for this line of argument. Samuel P. Huntington famously wrote in the opening sentence of *Political Order in Changing Societies* that "[t]he most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government."[3] For Huntington, social mobilization without political institutionalization would result in political decay. Without order, development of any kind would be impossible, and order would be impossible without strong institutions. More recently, Francis Fukuyama has noted that a key feature of many countries in the developing world is the gap between the formal claims of state authority, which mimic patterns in the advanced industrialized democracies, and the actual capacity to govern.[4] The rhetoric of the United States government with respect to Afghanistan and Iraq focuses heavily on the need to build state capacity. Effective governance in the first instance, American officials have argued, requires well-trained security forces, both the police and the military.[5]

Rational choice offers a third perspective on the trajectory of political and economic development. Rational choice sees economic growth and effective governance as the result of decisions taken by key actors. These decisions are always self-interested. They reflect material incentives. Most, but not all, rational choice analyses point to the importance of institutions, which facilitate the conclusion of mutually beneficial bargains by solving commitment problems. In contrast with institutional capacity theory, however, rational choice institutionalists understand institutions as mechanisms that can make political bargains stable and enduring, rather than as structures that concentrate power and authority. For those focusing on institutional capacity, the concentration of power is essential; for rational choice institutionalists, it is fatal.[6]

Despite their great differences, modernization theory, institutional capacity, and rational choice institutionalism are all premised on the assumption that effective governance—governance by a state or some other institutional structure with geographic reach, and scope over some range of activities (beginning with taxation and war)—is, if not good in some absolute sense, better than life without a state. The shadow of Hobbes's *Leviathan,* and for that matter of Locke's *Second Treatise* and Rousseau's *Social Contract,* has set the boundaries concerning how we think about, and value, political authority. For recent political science analysis, the Holy Grail has been to understand how power and authority could be concentrated in the state and yet constrained. The alternative to an absence of power was the state of nature or some simulacrum thereof, such as Scott's hill people. Whether in Hobbes's presocial and completely negative, or Locke's more benign prepolitical understanding, these alternatives to hierarchically organized political authority were wanting, incapable of providing security and other public goods. As Amartya Sen has argued, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, despite their differences, are all exemplars of a powerful Enlightenment intellectual project that he has called transcendental institutionalism, an effort to identify the ideally just society.[7] The dominant intellectual perspectives in the contemporary discussion of state development follow in this tradition.

Scott offers a radically different understanding of the nature of the state and society. The three core propositions in *The Art of Not Being Governed* are as follows:

- The state for most of human history has been a coercive apparatus organized around war and slaving.
- Individuals for most of history sought to elude the grasp of the state, and those who succeeded, primarily by fleeing to geographically inaccessible areas, lived lives of independence and dignity.
- Technological change has inexorably enhanced the power of the state over the individual. Since 1945, escape has become impossible.

The first of these propositions is widely shared. Charles Tilly referred to the state as a protection racket. For rational choice institutionalists, an unconstrained state will engage in rent seeking and exploitation. In *Violence and Social Orders,* Douglass North, John Wallace, and Barry Weingast contend that open-access orders in which state authorities are constrained by competing organizations have existed only for the last 150 years or so, and that even now

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there are only a couple of dozen states that would fall into this category.[8] And in his seminal 1959 article, Seymour Martin Lipset pointedly noted that while social and economic progress favored democracy, they did not guarantee it, Nazi Germany being one vivid case in point.[9]

The attraction of escaping from the state has not, however, been part of these analyses, whether based on modernization theory, institutional capacity, or rational choice institutionalism. That is why the second of Scott's propositions, the attraction and viability of flight, is so eye opening. Given the burden of taxation, conscription, and slavery, there was an incentive to flee. Given the limits of state power throughout most of human history, there was sometimes an opportunity to flee. Given the proximity of mountainous inaccessible terrain, there was a good chance of permanently escaping the clutches of the state. And—here is the critical point—life in stateless societies was much more attractive than life in states. In the hills, people were free, equal, and healthy. In the plains, they were enslaved, demeaned, and sick.

It is not just that the social contract is an analytic fiction, that human beings are social animals and have never lived as isolated individuals; it is also that the logic of the social contract is based on empirically incorrect assumptions. There is no reason to think that individuals living in acephalous fluid societies would ever have signed their freedom away to any state authority. The whole idea of the social contract is based upon the false premise that there was an incentive to move from statelessness to the state. While many contemporary writers have recognized that state power can break down and that there is no necessary movement from tyrannical to constrained authority, they have been blind to the fact that throughout human history, many human beings have been able to escape the clutches of the state and have been better off for it. The invention of settled agriculture, that first great step in the standard stories of civilization, is, for Scott, an unhappy development because it enables and encourages the concentration of political power but does not improve human well-being. People did not live longer because they could grow rice or wheat, but they were less free.

Scott's third proposition about the inexorable expansion of state power draws on the same logic as modernization theory but arrives at very different conclusions. Empirically, the relationship between economic growth and democratization is more complicated than modernization theory initially suggested. There is not a strong relationship between per capita income and transitions from autocracy to democracy, but once a transition has occurred it is much more likely to be durable at higher levels of per capita income.[10] Scott does not deny the general logic of modernization theory nor the empirical evidence associated with it. His normative judgment, however, about the benefits for human beings of living in well-ordered democratic states is reserved, and not all states are democratic or well ordered. In *Seeing Like a State,* Scott pointed out that the combination of growing bureaucratic control, autocratic authority structures, and what he called high modernist ideology—a strong belief in progress and rationality—had been catastrophic. Without civil society and some kind of democratic constraints, individual freedom would be crushed. In the book under discussion, he points to the extent to which even in polities with democratic institutions and civil society, individuals are now dependent for their security on a state that is intruding ever more into their lives.

For Scott, the trajectory of human history has been, at best, ambiguous. The achievements of the ancient and classical worlds rested on exploitation. The pyramids are very impressive, but they would never have been built if the possibilities of escape for the denizens of Egypt had not been so constrained by the deserts that surrounded the Nile Valley.[11] Slaves comprised a large proportion of the population of classical Athens. Rome oppressed and exploited those that it conquered.[12]

The Enlightenment and the scientific and industrial revolutions had an uncertain impact on human well-being. Scott emphasizes in *Seeing Like a State* that effective administration, high modernist ideology, and autocracy created monstrous regimes (pp. 88–89). In the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Mao's China, tens of millions died not only because of civil and international wars but also because of murderous state policies. Democratic accountability and civil society can provide protection from these depredations, Scott argues, but even this protection comes at a price with regard to individual freedom. Leviathan may be constrained in democracies but not tamed.

At least before 1945, some human beings were able to lead lives of freedom and dignity if they were fortunate enough to find themselves in a terrain that offered protection from the state. Not only did individuals avail themselves of the opportunity to escape if they could, but they also enjoyed a fuller life if they succeeded. Life was nasty and brutish, and probably shorter, within the state than outside it. Hobbes was wrong.

What Scott underplays is that while the possibilities of escape from the state are gone, the benefits of living within a well-governed state have increased. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, not much had changed for millennia with regard to human well-being. Most children died. Life expectancy was short. Napoleon's armies moved at the same rate of speed as Alexander the Great's. Scott makes a compelling argument that while the agricultural revolution made it possible to concentrate people and create states, it also enabled—required—slavery and oppression.

The creation of larger political structures and an economic surplus was, however, a necessary though not sufficient condition for the scientific revolution, which has transformed the possibilities for human well-being.

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Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America,* explicitly recognizes the Manichean character of states, especially large ones:

> It may therefore be asserted as a general proposition that nothing is more opposed to the well-being and the freedom of men than vast empires. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the peculiar advantages of great states. . . . If we would learn why great nations contribute more powerfully to the increase of knowledge and the advance of civilization than small states, we shall discover an adequate cause in the more rapid and energetic circulation of ideas and in those great cities which are the intellectual centers where all the rays of human genius are reflected and combined.[13]

The changes in knowledge that resulted from the scientific and industrial revolutions have opened paths that were not visible for almost all of human history. Scott's discussion makes it clear that it was, and still is, more desirable to live in the hills of Burma than under the oppression of the Burmese state, but Copenhagen, London, and New York, perhaps even New Haven, would be more attractive to most people. The impediments to improvements in basic human well-being—longer life expectancy, lower child mortality, less illness—are now political, not material. Most of the citizens of open-access societies enjoy physical security and material prosperity. On average, they live longer than men or women have ever lived before. Rarely do their children die before the age of five. Bearing a child does not carry the threat of death.

Scott's pessimism may yet be warranted. We could blow ourselves up. But other paths are also open. There is more wisdom in Hobbes, or at least Locke, than Scott allows.

Notes

1 Inglehart and Welzel 2005 (16) traces the idea back to the Enlightenment.
2 For the seminal statement of the modernization thesis, see Lipset 1959. For more recent formulations, see Inglehart and Welzel 2005 and 2009.
3 Huntington 1968, 1.
4 Fukuyama 2004.
5 United States Embassy, Kabul, and United States Forces, Afghanistan 2009.
6 For two recent examples of rational institutionalism, see Acemoglu and Robinson 2006 and North, Wallace, and Weingast 2009.
7 Sen 2009.
8 North, Wallace, and Weingast 2009. See also the 2010 symposium "The State and Violence." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (1):287–96.
9 Lipset 1959.
10 Przeworski et al. 2000.
11 Allen 1997.
12 See Adrienne Mayer 2010, *The Poison King,* for a discussion that depicts the East, or at least Anatolia, as more protective of human freedom than Rome.
13 Tocqueville 1889, Chapter VIII.

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