

LSU Honors 2030: States of Nature  
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Notes on James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009).

## SCOTT'S METHOD

I will rearrange the order of presentation in the Preface to emphasize some connections of principles. Under each of the three main headings there is a dialectic of escape and living free that is a theoretical mirror of the historical process being examined: first, a critical interpretation of state thought (escape) and then a positive project of examining the practices of self-governing peoples (living free).

### ANTI-STATE-CENTRISM

*Critical interpretation of state denigration of the other:* “My argument is a deconstruction of Chinese and other civilizational discourses about the ‘barbarian,’ the ‘raw,’ the ‘primitive.’ On close inspection, those terms, practically, mean ungoverned, not-yet-incorporated. Civilizational discourses never entertain the possibility of people voluntarily going over to the barbarians, hence such statuses are stigmatized and ethnicized. Ethnicity and ‘tribe’ begin exactly where taxes and sovereignty end—in the Roman Empire as in the Chinese” (Preface, p x-xi).

*Positive project: writing the history of non-state peoples as the complement of state-centered history* (the original and implicit affirmative universal “all history is that of the state” has to be changed to an explicit pair of particulars “not all history is that of the state” and “some history is that of non-state peoples”): “The huge literature on state-making, contemporary and historic, pays virtually no attention to its obverse: the history of deliberate and reactive statelessness. This is the history of those who got away, and state-making cannot be understood apart from it. This is also what makes this an anarchist history” (Preface, p x).

### ANTI-PROGRESSIVISM

*Critical interpretation of state progressivism:* From a state perspective, “self-governing peoples” are “living ancestors,” a glimpse of pre-agricultural, pre-civilized life. Here is a politics of anthropology, a way that progressivism or evolutionism is put to work, legitimating incorporation of non-state peoples to allow them access to modernity. Scott argues, on the contrary, “hill people are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppression of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare” (Preface, p ix).

*Positive project of describing “primitivism” as anti-state choice:* “the argument reverses much received wisdom about ‘primitivism’ generally. Pastoralism, foraging, shifting cultivation, and segmentary lineage systems are often a ‘secondary adaptation,’ a kind of ‘self-barbarization’ adopted by peoples whose location, subsistence, and social structure are adapted to state evasion. For those living in the shadow of states, such evasion is also perfectly compatible with derivative, imitative, and parasitic state forms in the hills” (Preface, p x).

### ANTI-DETERMINISM

*Critical interpretation of ecological and cultural determinism, or, putting the politics into “political economy”:* “Usually, forms of subsistence and kinship are taken as given, as ecologically and culturally determined. By analyzing various forms of cultivation, particular crops, certain social structures, and physical mobility patterns for their escape value, I treat such givens as political choices” (Preface, p xi).

*Positive project of describing anti-state practices:* “physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility, their cropping practices, their kinship structures, their pliable ethnic identities, and their devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders all serve to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them” (Preface, p x).

## SCOTT’S MULTIPLICITY

Scott describes a multiplicity with topographical / transport-technological, political-economic, political-organizational, administrative, and violence elements. A multiplicity is a set of interacting processes in which thresholds in the relations of processes produce qualitative changes in the behavior of the system.

For Scott, “state” and “non-state” processes are in “dialectical” or “mutually constituting” relations. The “state” processes (enclosure, enslavement, taxing ...) here are orienting limits, with classic, colonial, and post-colonial states with varying capacities to approach the limits and maintain / reproduce those gains. The “non-state” processes (flight, nomadicism, raiding ...) also admit of degrees, with well-administered states in times of economic growth sometimes attracting non-state peoples to settle down. States and non-states exchange (at different rates at different times) people, customs, and goods across the “membrane” that frontiers provide, all mediated by smugglers, traders, brokers, peddlers, and so on.

However, the whole analysis is governed by the “last enclosure” thesis whereby post-WW2 “distance-destroying technologies” (roads / cars / ATVs; planes / helicopters / drones; electronic communications) are severely encroaching upon ability to live a self-governing or non-state life. However, again (something Scott underplays), climate change could quite possibly throw a spanner in the works and allow more leeway for non-state living.

- I. Topographical / transport-technological (“friction of terrain”)
  - a. State spaces: valleys and rivers / oceans
    - i. military enforcement
    - ii. administrative “visibility”
    - iii. economic integration limited by cost per unit weight across distance:
      1. much easier by water
      2. by land, human / animal power constrained by its need for fuel, which it also had to carry with it
  - b. Non-state spaces:
    - i. hills / mountains (in this book)
    - ii. but generalizable to any zone where state reach is hampered: jungles, deserts, marshes, and so on.
- II. Political economy (production)
  - a. State
    - i. coerced by state: sedentary river valley rice agriculture is legible, taxable / appropriateable, and the population is conscriptable into army or into corvée labor

1. slavery
    - a. capture of hill people by raiding
    - b. debt bondage
  2. share-cropping
  3. conscripted (“corvée”) labor for infrastructure and / or monuments
  - ii. however,
    1. Scott rejects Wittfogel by claiming states did not build irrigation, but took over historical, slow, accretions of it
    2. similarly, you can have terraced rice cultivation in hills and wet-rice w/o states or states w/o wet rice (64-65)
  - iii. tolerated / encouraged by state
    1. independent urban artisanal production
    2. temple / palace luxury goods (also by trade / gift)
    3. products for trade with hill peoples
      - a. fish and other foods unavailable in the hills
      - b. manufactured goods (e.g., metal tools and weapons)
  - b. non-state production
    - i. food production / consumption
      1. swidden agriculture / horticulture
      2. nomadic steppe pastoralism
      3. nomadic foraging
    - ii. trade with states (sale, barter, debt payment, tribute [106])
      1. by land (high density / high value)
        - a. plants: medicinals / spices (opium, pepper)
        - b. animals: birds, feathers, honey
        - c. minerals: jewels
      2. by water (can be bulkier)
        - a. timber
        - b. cattle
        - c. animal products (e.g., furs)
        - d. hill agriculture (yams, rice, etc)
      3. enslaved people
- III. Political organization
- a. State
    - i. concentrated manpower (64)
      1. for agriculture
      2. for military
        - a. to squeeze peasants
        - b. to hold geographically important positions to collect tolls on trade
        - c. but concentration allows famines / epidemics
    - ii. central command authority with radiating subordinates
    - iii. military specialization / conscription
    - iv. taxes
      1. land rents based on “visible” agricultural productivity
      2. tolls / taxes commercial transactions
    - v. conscripted (“corvée”) labor
  - b. non-state “shatter zones”
    - i. egalitarian / acephalic bands

- ii. chiefdoms
- iii. temporary alliances

#### IV. Ethnic / kinship / linguistic structures

- a. state systems:
  - i. need ease of incorporation in order to concentrate populations, even if we see use of ethnicity for stratification
  - ii. once incorporated, we see tendency to uniformity, fixity, religious orthodoxy (155)
- b. non-state peoples: multiple / flexible kinship ("ethnogenesis")
  - i. ethnicity: varying declared identities depending who was asking
    - 1. p 254: "identities are plural ... and systematically structured by relations of power and prestige ... a bandwidth of traits or identities that could be deployed or performed as the situation required.... Ethnic identity ... would be the repertoire of possible performances and the contexts in which they are exhibited"
    - 2. nonetheless with states providing constraints
  - ii. tribes:
    - 1. often state creations for administration
    - 2. can become a self-identity for political purposes
  - iii. kinship:
    - 1. ease of incorporation of immigrants, captives, in-marrying
    - 2. ease of creating fictitious lineages to legitimate new aristocrats
  - iv. languages: hill peoples tend to multi-lingualism

#### V. Regimes of violence

- a. State
  - i. primary violence of state-making warfare:
    - 1. territorial incorporation
    - 2. population enslavement and resettlement
    - 3. law as monopolization of legitimate violence
  - ii. secondary violence (once state is formed):
    - 1. tax terrorization
    - 2. enforcement of conscription and corvée labor
- b. non-state
  - i. anti-state fighting (state-avoiding; fighting state agents)
  - ii. internal state-preventing violence (exile, "capital punishment")
  - iii. predation on state economies
    - 1. trade routes
    - 2. raids:
      - a. stealing from produce of valley agricultural enslaved people
      - b. slave-raiding (population is targeted commodity)