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Paths to freedom: Political prospecting in the ethnographic record

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Abstract

The recent discovery that Southeast Asia's highland peoples had not been traditional tribals but were instead clever freedom-seekers brings up various questions regarding the politics of ethnographic prospecting. The ostensible anarchism of standing outside the state dismisses the possibility of political negotiation. It offers instead liberalist moral geography that celebrates individualism and the cutting of social connections, as it disregards anyone – at home or far afield – who may have to bargain for basic rights and services. I offer historical, ethnographic, and political counters to the case. Aristotle and feminist history deny categorical certainties in favor of practical concerns with equality and justice. Analytical mastery and academic point-scoring distract from ethical concerns: subversive levity may offer the only non-authoritarian counter-move.

Keywords

anarchism, anthropology, difference, representation, the state

James C. Scott's recent argument for viewing the minority areas of highland Southeast Asia in terms of strategies of state-avoidance offers a reconsideration of what had been a tribal zone in earlier anthropology. The case draws on ethnography and history, but through an underlying model of social interaction in terms of a moral binary of oppression and freedom. As an anthropologist of the region in question, I examine why the case seems so right and interesting to so many people. No ethnographic or historical quibbles will affect the benefit that readers may derive from certain books. Rather than insist that the book is about Southeast Asia and should only be held against materials about that region, I suggest turning

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anthropology around to examine how academic books enable identity-work within divided western societies.

I am implicated in this process in several ways; as a source for some statements about Southeast Asia's highland areas, and as a professor who assigns certain books to students to shake them out of some western cultural and political biases. The case for Zomia, as Scott calls the highland region, assumes a fundamental tension between states – bent on subjugation and taxation – and the people who escape to pockets of freedom in the hinterlands. Ontology and history combine in the binary social typology, and the case resembles other functionalist approaches to apparently exotic practices in terms of their ostensibly rational effects. The complete disregard for historical or ethnographic particulars serves to make culturally other highland Southeast Asians inherently familiar to the western readers.

The case draws on anthropologists who have generally assumed divisions between highland and lowland peoples of Southeast Asia, and have viewed national integration with suspicion. From ethnographic materials on Thailand's Mien people, I question prevalent understandings of highland peoples and their histories. The notion of the state as oppressive animates the case for Zomia and enables anarchist identification. Anthropologists may argue for or against Zomia, or view themselves in relation to the case and ask what it indicates about our discipline and ethics. Aristotle and feminist scholarship suggest alternatives to expectations of historically transcendent antagonisms between two social types; a rethinking of political communities and of difference more generally; and a different orientation for scholarship on inequality.

The case for Zomia

In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (hereafter, *Anarchist History*), James C. Scott (2009) argues regarding Southeast Asia's highland shifting cultivators that their various patterns of culture, social organization, agriculture, and religion cohere as adaptive strategies to stay outside the state's reach. The case rests on a notion of the state as a people-hungry tax machine; evoking Oriental Despotism (Wittfogel, 1957) without bringing up the term:

The state was tyrannical, but episodically so. Physical flight, the bedrock of popular freedom, was the principal check on state power. [Subjects] who were sorely tried by conscription, forced labor, and taxes would typically move away to the hills or to a neighboring kingdom rather than revolt. (Scott, 2009: 33)

This analytical and descriptive premise sets Southeast Asian history in motion as it animates the ethnology – the account of what kinds of people there are and what can happen to them through interaction.

The book assumes a meta-history of human social evolution: with the evolution of agriculture came state structures, and with these came oppression; ‘the drudgery, subordination, and immobility of state subjects’ (2009: 10). *Anarchist History* prospects through the ruins of Southeast Asian ethnography for dramatic lessons about the world, on the assumption that states are oppressive and that this oppression’s antithesis – freedom – lies in strategies of evading the state’s grasp. These have supposedly come to an end: the argument about highland people’s strategies to evade the state ‘makes little sense for the period following the Second World War’ because the modern nation state has the technologies ‘to bring nonstate peoples to heel’ (2009: 337, xii, 78). Scott overrides the considerable diversity of peoples, cultures, histories, and social conditions by using the label Zomia to capture all the highland regions together, in Burma, southern China, northern Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Through this analytical and descriptive strategy, history and identity emerge in a singular dynamic:

The innumerable hill peoples of Zomia have been avoiding states for more than a millennium. It is perhaps because they have fought and fled under so many names, in so many locations, and against so many states, traditional, colonial, and modern, that their struggle lacked the single banner that would have easily identified it. (2009: 245)

The term Zomia and the world it describes are two sides of the same paradigmatic coin. Highland shifting cultivation is ‘escape-agriculture’ (2009: 190), apparently non-hierarchical and fluid social relations are ‘social structures of escape’ (2009: 207), and the alleged lack of literacy and of history contribute to the absence of hierarchy and to an active disconnect from state structures (2009: 220–7). Religious prophets and ‘millenarian fervor [represent] an audacious poaching of the lowland ideological structure to [ward off or destroy] the states from which they are poached’ (2009: 322).

This characterization is central to the mimetic productivity of the analysis, the ability to convey another reality that offers the readers a shade of their own identities through the antagonistic binary of freedom and the state:

To stand back and take this all in, to wonder at the capacity of hill peoples to strike out, almost overnight, for new territory – socially, religiously, ethnically – is to appreciate the mind-boggling cosmopolitanism of relatively marginal and powerless people. Far from being a backward, traditional people in the presumptive grip of custom and habit, they seem positively protean (even Californian) in imagining themselves anew. (2009: 315)

The analysis proceeds in the manner of adaptationist arguments to characterize apparently exotic practices in terms of effects that seem rational to western readers (Sahlins, 1976). The whole analysis hinges on two notions; the state is oppressive, and sedentism entails subjugation. This assumption lends sense to the data as it inspires its collection. Mobility, ‘the bedrock of popular freedom’ (Scott, 2009: 33),

accounts for the absence of revolt or other violent reaction to ostensibly pervasive oppression. But this signification is a product of the analytical model itself, which refuses to prospect for any possibility of political negotiation as mutually beneficial.

The highland people flee state control, based on ‘ethnic and tribal identities [which] have been put in the service not merely of autonomy but statelessness’ (Scott, 2009: 244) – ethnic labels are simply manifestations of the political project of avoiding the state (2009: 238–82). Ostensible Zomians had ‘a mixed portfolio of subsistence techniques [which yielded] a mixed portfolio of social structures that [could] easily be invoked for political and economic advantage’ (2009: 211). Radically culturally other Asian shifting cultivators of the past appear inherently familiar to certain western readers once their alleged tradition and lack of progress have been redefined as strategies to gain and retain freedom from taxation and other oppression: Here are ‘natives’ through which some westerners can see themselves, similar to what Madden (2003) suggests about studies of homeless people in western cities. As in the studies she critiques, the aim of *Anarchist History* is the analytical mastery of the subject; this is an act of appropriation that denies any specific realities to Asian highland peoples.

In the Introduction to an earlier book, *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998: 1) wrote that before that project took shape, he had:

set out to understand why the state has always seemed to be the enemy of ‘people who move about’, [the perennial tension in Southeast Asia] between mobile, slash-and-burn hill peoples on one hand and wet-rice, valley kingdoms on the other.

This antagonism is not a historical fact in any simple way. Social units have been internally diverse and their relations have been varied, historically and across the region. The issue with *Anarchist History* is not that it may in places be wrong regarding ethnography and history, but that the case seems so right and interesting to many western readers.

Mimesis and distinction

One of the sources for the narrative in *Anarchist History* is Pierre Clastres’ *Society against the State* (1977), about Latin America, particularly his ‘daring interpretation of state-evading and state-preventing native peoples’ (Scott, 2009: xiii). This binary of the pure natives and the alien and oppressive state enables political identification across difference – the state is essentially the same anywhere, a machine of taxation and subjugation; anti-freedom. The contrast between Zomians and the state facilitates identity and distinctions in the West.

This kind of academic anarchism brings focus on the evils of the state, and the apparent gain is the possibility of political rebirth. Ethnogenesis in opposition to the state is myth in Malinowski’s (1922: 328) sense of a charter for action and an ideal for aspiration: It promises the readers that they too can be

reborn politically – any trappings of previous identities and histories are erased once people come into new being through their opposition to the state. Zomians did it; so can modern anarchists (see Graeber, 2004: 43, 55; Marshall, 2010: 704).

The notion of the state as oppressive and subjugating enables certain self-conscious anarchists to recognize those of alternative political or social persuasions as agents or dupes of the state; people who lack the virtuous political devotion to freedom. The plot may resemble the film *The Matrix*, with its '[central horrific] vision of nearly all humanity enclosed in pods, their vital energies serving as batteries fueling the artificial machine intelligence that dominates the world' (Roberts, 2009: 114). If so, then audience members can identify with the hero, Neo, who 'always knew something was wrong'. One of the dramatic tensions in the film is that 'among the freedom fighters [who liberated Neo] is the slithery traitor Cypher, who wants back into the comforts of the matrix. He is weak, precisely because he desires the plug of dependence' (2009: 114). *Anarchist History* implies that involvements with the state and sedentism are sources of pollution or weakness among considerable portions of humanity (see, for parallels, Douglas, 1966; Martin, 1994).

The Zomia-case appears to express prospecting for new politics in the West, and some western comparisons may help highlight aspects of the argument. As with the Protestant Reformation (Weber, 1930), the recent interest in anarchism is a reaction against an allegedly corrupt and materialist institution (the Catholic Church, Empire, the state). By severing any links to the corrupting institution, an individual may, through sincere efforts, gain direct links to the sources of self-worth or salvation. Any '[social or material] embeddedness may pose a threat [to the goal of] autonomous, individual selves. [The] modern subject must be the source of its own value, standing apart from ancestral agents, social others, and material things' (Keane, 2002: 69, 74). What the Catholic Church signified to the Protestants and the monarchy for nationalists, the state now evokes among some anarchists. The lessons of the case for Zomia suggest the following caricature: mobile, affluent, repeatedly self-inventing western people who oppose taxation are true inheritors of a mystical land in the east, high in the mountains, that has expired but left us lessons about the path to freedom.

As a dramatic narrative, Zomia sets history and ethnology in motion with a beginning (oppression and flight), middle (strategies of state avoidance), and an end (successful subjugation by the end of the Second World War), through which a reader can see herself in the world as the lessons from Zomia are transplanted (Scott, 2009: 324). The mimetic equivalence between Southeast Asian pasts and the modern western present enables the reach and relevance of *Anarchist History*. Perhaps more than half of its readers are western university students, who are assigned the book by their professors.

Scott is known for challenging his readers to rethink some basic ideas about how states and people connect, and to recognize the value of resistance to state power. His books offer alternatives to the celebratory rhetoric of western civilization that is pervasive in his home-discipline of political science and more generally in the public sphere of media and education. This is a ground for self-fashioning where a

range of ideas travel among scholars and readers and where people identify diversely but internally in relation to such otherwise elusive notions as 'the West', 'the state', and 'the people'.

A complex relationship among authors, audience, the *Zeitgeist*, education systems, and the internal diversity of western middle-class society affects the reception of academic books. Empiricist critique of the Zomia case will not affect its readers' world. It is in their expectations that I situate the importance of the notion that some people came into identity by choosing to stand outside the state. In democratic American culture, choice appeals to strongly individualist values: making choices is essential for one's identity; through shopping, voting, and voluntary associations (Handler, 2005).

The Zomia case may also represent a version of the American Frontier Hypothesis that is identified with Frederick Jackson Turner, that 'living in the wilderness fostered individualism, independence, and confidence in the common man that encouraged self-government. [Turner linked wilderness] in the minds of his countrymen with sacred American virtues' (Nash, 1982: 146). Any such representation is never simply the work of an individual but is also of a historical moment and draws on complex traffic across cultural and other difference (Schmitt, 1969): 'The man in the street still thinks in terms of a necessary antagonism between society and the individual. [We] tend to identify society with the restrictions the law imposes on us' (Benedict, 1934: 252). What was society for the man in the street is now the state for some of the educated middle class – the meta-force that is out to curb their freedom and individuality.

Ethnological checks

When *Anarchist History* alludes to the contemporary ethnicized conflict in Burma as how things have always been between the state and those seeking freedom in the forested hinterlands (Scott, 2009: xii, 94–5, 179–82), a highly particular situation is rendered not only in questionable moral terms but also as fate; one that we are led to understand in terms of social types. *Anarchist History* allows no possibility of recognizing positive outcomes from political or other negotiation across difference. Nor does it consider the historical or other particularity of inequality or the legacies of war. The book rests instead on a bargain; Zomians were either 'traditional people in the presumptive grip of custom and habit' or they were marginal people with 'mind-boggling cosmopolitanism' (2009: 315) who had found the paths to freedom and were under constant threat of subjugation.

The notion of political organization in highland Southeast Asia as the outcome of how people situated themselves in relation to states derives partly from the ethnological record. Edmund Leach's (1954) *Political Systems of Highland Burma* presented the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and political diversity of that region as the shifting outcome of people's choices among egalitarian, hierarchic, and stratified esteem-systems (1954: 10). While the ethnohistorical basis for this claim appears vacuous (Sadan, 2007), it became relevant as a challenge to other

British anthropologists' characterization of ethnicity and political organization. *Anarchist History* cites some of my work, thus I see myself as part of the problem. At an early point I wrote about partly autonomous highland societies as 'non-subjects' of lowland states, and hinterland foraging and shifting cultivation as strategies that had particular social and political consequences. But I could not take this very far, and my conviction faded as fieldwork encounters brought me to other senses of ethnicity, history, politics, and the ethics of ethnological representation.

The Mien (Yao) people I worked with had come into historical recognition through their engagements with Chinese states. They were expressly declared as unfit for the civilized Chinese domain, and officially confined to the 'forested wilderness' beyond lowland society. *Anarchist History* declares that highlanders were those who got away. Quite the contrary, it seems that highland peoples and ethnic labels were repeatedly defined and situated through contracts, exclusion, and ethnic stratification. Historically, upland–lowland relations show more features of denied similarities and denied recognition than ever of escape, and no signs of a state's indiscriminate appetite for incorporation. Across East and Southeast Asia, there was considerable interaction among highland peoples and lowland societies, including the state, but this is never prominent in the archives. There are, in contrast, various historical cases of public separation, such as the ritual driving away of Kha and Lwa peoples from Tai (Lao, Shan, Yuan, etc.) domains (Archaimbault, 1964; Jonsson, 2005: 19–23) that suggest public humiliation and denied similarities.

Such examples are indications of historical realities. They suggest that states sometimes made special efforts to demarcate certain social boundaries. But the insistence on social purity and absolute separation from particular others is a political project, that in each case needs to be situated in specific contexts of interaction and differentiation. The absolutism about a social divide, that states and highlanders in Southeast Asia and adjacent China had antagonistic relations, is questionable and no idle play. Cases of fundamental antagonism between lowland states and hinterland Yao and Mien (as ethnically other) have been actively produced by particular policies in specific contexts; they are not a regular feature and manifest neither 'the state' nor 'highlanders' (Alberts 2006; Jonsson, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). David Faure (2005, 2007), after decades of archival work, shows that cases of violent interactions were outcomes of specific ambitions and networking of individuals: the elite in a far-off province was able to get significant attention in the capital by conjuring up the Yao as a national security threat. Faure finds no pattern to highland–lowland relations, nor to the state as an actor: there is none. The patterns to regional history don't point to the state or Yao as stable entities or projects.

Looking for ways of anchoring highland-related Asian ethnography and history to more general understandings, I have come to mistrust prevalent western notions of states as a moral force, inherently either oppressive or benevolent. So far, the only serious analytical alternative to the moral binary of the state and the people that I have found is in the works of Aristotle. In his *Politics* (1996), he defines

people as political animals, in the sense of their deriving benefits, sustenance, and even pleasure from being in a political community. He suggests that states can be distinguished by how they distribute the benefits of membership, and that the best political community is where benefits are divided most evenly (*Politics IV*, 8–11). Aristotle insists on knowing the historical conditions of any political community before passing any judgment, as they are not an ontological given but rather can change characteristics on a range from tyranny to democracy.

This is more amenable to ethnographic pursuits than the common western tendency to assume that the state inherently brings people either deliverance or a curse. Aristotle asks how a political community benefits or discriminates its members, and is alert to how social factions may maneuver particular situations in their favor and to the detriment of others. Descriptively and analytically, the issue is not the state, but how certain understandings of difference predetermine notions of what can happen to people. Some rhetoric declares men and women as historically transcendent opposites; as oppressors and the oppressed. Historian Joan W. Scott (1988) emphatically denies categorical approaches to gender and gender difference. Along the lines of her analysis, the expectation that highland peoples and lowland states in Southeast Asia had inherently different characteristics and interests serves to render political and ethnic categorizations as ‘a natural rather than a social phenomenon’ (1988: 4). She asks: ‘What is at stake in proclamations or debates that invoke gender to explain or justify their positions [and how are] implicit understandings of gender being invoked and reinscribed?’ (1988: 49).

To think scholarship on Asian minorities along similar lines, we need to ask whose interests are served by expecting certain people’s moral or political weakening or defeat from dealings with the state. For any ethnic minority village people who have talked with me in the hinterlands of Southeast Asia (in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and refugees from Laos), the test of any relationship with spirits or with people of power lies in the outcome of their interactions. They do not expect power to be moral, and have no categorical aversion to dealings with state agents.

The Mien case

When I first became involved in field research in Thailand, I expected a fundamental antagonism between the state and hinterland populations, and I may have been as actively engaged as any other highland anthropologist in writing to denounce the Thai state and its denigration of highland ways. I have come to view it as inaccurate and irresponsible to represent an ethnic group or even a single settlement as united or ever historically transcendent in their position on politics. The one genuine political confrontation that I have dealt with in writing – when about 500 of Thailand’s Mien people marched on some official buildings, told the staff to leave, set fire to the houses and then walked back home – was all about expressing allegiance with the country and its goals of development and democracy (Jonsson, 2005: 127–47).

This was neither anarchism nor separatism, but a creative and desperate political act that responded to pervasive marginalization by demanding that the state live up to its goals and promises in the countryside: even highlanders' political protest seems generally oriented toward making and managing relations with states than avoiding them. Much of the politics that takes place in contemporary ethnic minority hinterland settlements concerns attempts to establish and maintain beneficial relations with the outside world, including government officials and development projects.

My historical research suggests considerable similarity in how some highland people engaged with state agents and with the realm of spirits. In each case, people establish a contract for protection and potential benefits that has to be renewed annually and in each case to be negotiated and paid for, while there was considerable inequality regarding who could strike what contract. A household head makes a deal with ancestor spirits, a village leader contracts the spirit of a lowland official, while the leader of a larger group such as a multi-village migration may strike a deal with a royal spirit, similar to how a multi-village leader would establish a contract (for settlement and sometimes tribute and services) with a lowland ruler (Jonsson, 2005: 73–98).

Within the highlands, such multi-village leaders had considerable clout, but people's experience and assessment of them has been varied – from admiration among close relatives who benefited from their prominence, ambivalence from others who lived nearby but did not benefit in notable ways, to a sense of fear and disapproval among those who occasionally suffered from their rule and saw it as arbitrary and cruel (Jonsson, 2005: 81–5; 2009: 134).

This material has two implications: one concerns taxes, which *Anarchist History* presents as a matter of oppression or subjugation. Instead, Mien materials indicate that people took for granted that all relations had a material aspect. Through payment, people came into particular social identities as they initiated or maintained a relationship for particular benefits and to avert certain calamities. The other implication involves the tendency of highland anthropologists to view relations with spirits as somehow naturally a part of the culture and identity of a people, as internal to ethnic worlds whereas states and such entities were depicted as external. Again, materials from the Mien suggest reasons for reconsideration: spirits and lowland rulers are beings of power with whom one may strike relations if one has the social, material, or spiritual means; it is through such relations that social identities are created and internally differentiated.

People could establish a household without initiating relations with ancestor spirits. This generally served to exclude them from many social interactions and expressed destitution, not choice. Similarly, people made political and trade connections into the lowlands when and where they could: The cases of disconnect are something to examine and question, they are not signs of highland freedom.

It is historically inaccurate to declare that Southeast Asian highland identities were created and shaped by deliberate separation or escape from the state. The cases of state avoidance need to be historicized. One example is the

Thai government's implementation of an opium monopoly that rendered practically all the ethnic minority highland farmers illegal and made them vulnerable to arrests and official abuse every year, from the late 19th century and into the 1970s when the cultivation came to an end. Policies highly specific to time, place, and people set in motion particular structures of abuse; for the affected highlanders, evasion was the only practical strategy. I know of this reality in part from the population where I based my 1990s fieldwork. There, better-off farmers in five settlements were officially licensed to grow poppy and trade the opium, because of a deal that the Mien leader made with the king of Nan – a kingdom that later became a province – in the late 19th century and which lasted until 1958.

This population never experienced the intimidation and disconnect that was common in other regions of Thailand at this time; their leaders dealt with officials and traders on a regular basis. For this particular population, there were channels of interaction and negotiation with state agents dating back to their settlement in Nan in the 1880s, and elsewhere before then. Mutually beneficial interaction was thus foundational to their settlement and livelihood. Leaders generally came into contracts in ethnic terms, but benefits to individual settlements and even households varied considerably.

Reflections

Representation is intervention; how we categorize things sets up what we may do or can imagine (Aristotle, 1987; Hacking, 1983). Southeast Asian states could – and often did – enable trade connections, allow settlement, lay roads, establish and maintain schools, provide health care, and guarantee peace. States don't act, but negotiation among people can bring certain things about. *Anarchist History* declares as exemplary of highland freedom peoples who have either sought to evade abusive relations or have taken up arms in ways that sustain an ethnicized civil war. States can only come into view through draconian policies. People only appear in a positive light through voluntary associations for strategic gain: in terms of identity, political agency, and transient fellowship.

Zomia offers no place for Asian highlanders on whatever have been their own terms, but instead a vast playground for western libertarian distraction and delight. The proposed retreat away from the state, inspired-by-expired-Asia and by Zomians' 'formidable travel kit' (Scott, 2009: 329), must be historicized and viewed in its particular contexts so we may learn what it says about our world and how things can change. What should be seen as anomalous, abusive relations, such as the still continuing civil war in Burma, instead comes across as the way things normally are, given the nature of the state. This naturalism about the state is curious and troubling. Coupled with the celebration of disconnect from the state or from any political negotiation, it appears to 'echo the contradictions of a liberal capitalist discourse that advocates the minimization of state intervention and maximization of individual autonomy for affluent citizens' (Madden, 2003: 289).

Anarchist History proposes that political process is a matter of choice between freedom and subjugation. During the Cold War, this binary was central to US intervention in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, and US forces aided and abetted those who sided with freedom and against communist oppression. The case for Zomia appears to reflect the same binary in a post-Cold War setting. The state stands in the same monster-slot as did communism then, as Freedom's nemesis. Now the prospecting for Asian freedom (for American realization) is done by academics who warn against the evils of entanglement – in the form of social life and political negotiation.

It is perhaps a coincidence that the film *Rambo IV* is also anchored to ethnic insurgents who are under repeated and brutal attacks from the Burmese military. But there are many shades of an American Frontier identification of their wartime allies in the highlands of Southeast Asia; the Hmong of Laos and the Central Highlanders (Dega, Montagnard) of Vietnam (Pearson, 2009; Quincy, 2000). Seeing their own ideals in select others, Americans prospect for freedom in Asia, for the world as much as personally through violence and other means. For Aristotle (1996), anarchy meant being outside social relations and political negotiation, which he thought impossible for people but ideal for anyone above or below humanity; a beast or a god. Rambo may be the hybrid divine beast that is always ready to fight against the possibility of negotiating peaceful coexistence. The moral binary precludes diversity and any hybrids that come in human dimensions.

The book-ed Zomians are no equal to US military intervention in the highlands of Laos or Vietnam or to the masculine recklessness of *Rambo*. But these share many shades of the American Frontier. Zomia is very much a post-Cold War image for America's Southeast Asia; 'we' can still side with freedom and against oppression and find inspiration in them hills for our own redemption and conviction about the right choice. The US lost its wars in that region by 1975, and the wartime is now an alien world to college students. The book may allow them to head into the figurative hills shouting 'Live free or die!' before going home for dinner. Unless the matter is socially and historically situated, it suggests that reckless prospecting in Southeast Asia – for self-realization by siding with freedom and against oppression – is in the character of US Americans.

People choose between freedom and subjugation, it is as simple as that; and they live and die with the consequences. Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005) tells a related story of making the right choice or suffering the consequences of the wrong one. The imagery suggests a board game of success and failure, freedom or subjugation. An analysis flies if it offers the audience a more satisfying sense of the world, a new synthesis of reason and emotion (Lévi-Strauss, 1963): the notion that marginalization or oppression come down to people's bad choices and the state's inherent oppression is the new synthesis, and it has had a favorable reception in some educated circles.

Disagreement with James Scott's analysis should occasion reflection on the imagery that is socially trafficked, appreciated, and in demand, rather than finger-pointing over a book. Like footballers, academics play for an audience

that wants distraction, stimulation, suspense, and identification. Prospecting takes certain people into particular territory. The quest for freedom through escape from social bonds is for individual gain, as was gold prospecting in the American West. The 'natives' that are dispossessed in the Zomia process are, I think, any Southeast Asian hinterland peoples who need recognition, basic rights, and peace. But other 'natives' are sidelined as the case is transplanted: western readers are offered goggles through which to see a binary of freedom and oppression; not inequality, contradictions, complexity, pleasure, or negotiation. Scholarly engagement rather than authority would open alternative paths at home and away and between them; possibilities instead of closure.

Conclusions

Through images of the state, anarchy, the urban homeless, or Asia's highlanders, various people can come into identity, purpose, and agency. Attempting to influence such mimetic traffic has its risks. Wrestling with the Zomia case comes partly from seeing my work in the picture, as a source of ideas and statements that I now question. This article may be an attempt to expel my own ghosts. But my case also reflects what biases I picked up from working with Mien people; with some spirits you negotiate, others you want to drive away in unambiguous terms because they cause only harm. Negotiation and on-going relations with certain spirits can establish mutual benefit. This takes time, skill, resources, and consent or seduction. But wild spirits cannot be tamed by any human means – like Rambo, they are unfit and dangerous in human realms.

The questions about academic prospecting concern how it connects people and who can benefit from the process. How do the ideas relate to social life and for whom and how do they offer affective and cognitive satisfaction? If academics or bureaucrats benefit from examples of failure, harm, or suffering, by gaining analytical and other mastery over their subjects (the natives, the state, etc.), then they are deeply involved in projecting fatalism. Such ethnological prospecting produces indifference as it assigns blame (Herzfeld, 1992). It is curious to have scholars advocate disconnect from the state at a historical moment when many nation states are withdrawing themselves from supporting basic services such as education. The ideas point away from recognizing the role of universities and academics in reproducing social inequality: inequality is completely out of sight when the focus is between freedom and subjugation. Instead, 'the state' causes and explains misfortune, as did witchcraft among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1976).

Zomia addresses a western concern with how state and society relate; uncertain grounds that invite scholarly statements and arguments and rival identity-work among the audience (Mitchell, 1991). The idea that dealing with the state is to people's detriment echoes the anxiety, fear, and monitoring around ethnic boundaries (Greenwood, 1984; Herzfeld, 1997; Malkki, 1995). The refusal to imagine the centrality of political negotiation, rooted in fears of contamination or compromise, may be a prescription for political paralysis. Insisting that there is no 'state' and

that social intercourse across category-lines is normal and necessary (Abrams, 1988: 58; Aristotle, 1996; Latour, 2005) has more viable implications. Working against fatalism about inequality and ethnic or gendered difference at home, away, and between them is a practical concern and, for those who care, urgent (J.W. Scott, 1988). That, too, expresses prospecting.

I resist the pleasure of seeming right by declaring another scholar wrong: the game we play is dangerous and we are blind to its potential damage when focused on point-scoring – that which measures the worth of a footballer and an academic. The many intersections among war, social problems, and ethnological representation need consideration as practical and ethical matters. How people are type-cast determines what can happen to them in interaction, and limits how audiences can identify with the world (Aristotle, 1987).

‘They hate us for our freedom’, as one explanation of the horrendous attacks during September 11, 2001, helped produce two wars as it offered some people a satisfying synthesis of emotion and reason in identification with freedom against its ugly nemesis. The statement does not express the identity and character of US Americans; it is an agentic ontology that glosses over diversity at a moment of crisis. Any such antagonistic binary identification, in this case against ‘them’ – Muslims – as a category, may produce certainty and urgency as it removes any concern with the human and social cost at home and away and between them. Appeals to freedom emerge as an invitation to US American identification, while the contrast and repercussions are in each case specific.

Some irony establishes only distance and incredulity. But levity and gentle irony – that refuse superiority over an other side and instead recognize affinity and the benefits and urgency of collaboration (Fernandez and Huber, 2001) – can bring us to some self–other recognition and damage control, and then toward more careful work and mutually rewarding connections among diverse parties. Humor can be disarming and subversive, to academic pretense and to the idea that certain things cannot change or come into a different light; ‘a joke [exposes the inadequacy of realist structurings of experience. It] implies that anything is possible’ (Douglas, 1975: 108). One such possibility is readable, fair, and promising intersections among academia, field sites, and our home societies. This is no easy task, but; ‘people who chew sweets in the theatre do so mostly when the acting is bad’ (Aristotle, 1976: 323).

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