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The Art of Not Being Governed

Peter Lamborn Wilson

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a review of
James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press, 2009, cloth, 442 pp., \$35

How could any black-and-red-blooded anarchist resist a book with this title?

Admittedly, it's an expensive treat, but I'm very glad at last to discover a writer I should already have known: James C. Scott, who (like David Graeber) is an anthropologist at Yale and a self-confessed anarchist.

The thesis here is similar to the idea I developed in "The Shamanic Trace" (in *Escape from the Nineteenth Century*, Autonomedia, 1998), namely, that many present-day hunter/gatherer and primitive horticulturalist societies have, at some time, reverted to these "earlier" economic systems, progressing backward, so to speak, in order to escape the authoritarian State structure inherent in agricultural and industrial economies.

Scott would go further, however; he suggests that there's no such thing as "the tribe," and that all "primitive" societies

are always already engaged in escaping from the State. I love this use of the word escape—the escapism of a Houdini (“Love laughs at locksmiths”).

Scott uses the brilliant French anarchist anthropologist Pierre Clastres as the foundation for a re-appraisal of the old ethnographic masterpiece, Edmund Leach’s *The Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), using masses of material on the various anthropologies of a region famous for its “tribal insurrections” and messianic movements.

The key to escape from the agricultural state in the South-east Asian highlands and jungles is “swidden” (slash-and-burn) horticulture, which keeps the people mobile and self-sufficient. Swidden supports a lot of hunting and gathering, too, which leads to even more freedom.

In the most daring chapter of this work, Scott goes so far as to suggest that many “pre-literate” peoples may actually be post-literate, having given up textuality as a form of cognitive oppression. A brilliant notion!

Despite a tendency to rely on anthropological terminology and to repeat himself unnecessarily, Scott has clearly fled the flatlands of academe and its vague Enlightenment-humanist consensus for the uplands of chaos, adventure, escapism and anarchy. I hope never to hear that Scott is “in trouble at Yale”—even though I’d only admire him even more.