

'The Invention of the Tribe'

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“The history of people who have a history is, we are told, the history of class struggle. The history of people without a history is, we might say with at least as much truth, the history of their struggle against the state.” Pierre Clastres,

La société contre l’État, 1974.

The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia, James C. Scott, Yale University Press, 2009 – 442 pages

Whole societies without a State have existed until recently in Zomia, the vast mountainous region of south-east Asia which is far from the urban centres and significant economic activity.

This zone is also situated between eight nation-states, where several cosmologies and religious traditions co-exist and where the inhabitants have a chameleon identity, in other words one of multiple identities.

This a zone which States only managed to penetrate in the mid 20th century and then only with the aid of modern technology. This type of zone has also existed elsewhere in the world; in the Alps, the Appalachians, the Atlas mountains etc. Other kinds of geographical zones have also managed to remain outside the reach of States: seas, archipelagos, marshlands, coastal mangroves, forests, arid steppes, deserts etc [*ed. – ‘smooth’ space, a term in contest; see **Return Fire vol.4 pg56***].

In this book, the author argues that hill people are best understood as communities of run-aways and fugitives who, in the course of 2,000 years, have fled the oppression of State projects in the valleys – slavery, taxes, forced labour, epidemics and war. Tales of escape run through countless legends of the hills. These people’s physical dispersion across a rugged terrain, their mobility, their subsistence practice, their family structure, their chameleon ethnic identity and their devotion to millenarian leaders¹ have enabled them to avoid being incorporated into States and have prevented the State from emerging amongst them. He also argues that the culture of certain foods, the social structure made up of small autonomous groups and the patterns of physical mobility were political choices.

But since 1945 the capacity of the State to deploy distance-eliminating technology – railways, roads that stay open all year, telephones, telegraphs, aircraft and IT – has completely overturned the strategic balance of power between the autonomous peoples and the nation-states. Everywhere, States have invaded the “tribal zones” to extract natural resources and ensure the security and productivity of their periphery. Everywhere, they have ended up colonising the mountains and importing the slave-subject-citizen model.

Hills, Valleys & States

Zomia illustrates the extreme divide between inhabitants of valleys and those of the mountains, between those on the lower and higher reaches of the rivers. The populating of the hills goes hand in hand with the State-forming process in the valleys, with the colonisation of the land, the creation of borders and the grabbing of resources (slaves and raw materials).

Living without state structures was the norm in human history. When the State appears, living conditions change for semi-sedentary horticulturists, pushing many of them into fleeing taxes and war.

¹ ed. – Leading via apocalypse visions.

The arrival of agriculture as the principal means of subsistence, and of State society, came with new strategies for “bringing together the population”, such as the establishment of permanent villages, thus replacing open common property with closed private property.

Across the world, the phenomenon of enclosure² aimed to make the peasantry and the periphery profitable, forcing peasants to contribute to the wealth of the empire and into commercial exchanges, in the name of “development” and of “economic progress”. In practice, this amounts to making their activities ratable, taxable and liable to seizure.

This enormous ungoverned periphery (Zomia) long constituted a threat for all the States present in the various valleys. It sheltered fugitive and mobile populations organised on a subsistence basis – gathering, hunting, peripatetic [nomadic] growing, fishing, small-scale livestock farming – which were fundamentally resistant to appropriation by the State. But the biggest threat for the States was the constant temptation and alternative that it represented for their own populations of slaves; that of a life beyond the reach of the State.

A massive majority of the population of the first States was not free. Many dreamed of escaping from taxes, feudal labour and a condition of servitude. In pre-modern conditions, the concentration of the population, the presence of domestic animals and their heavy nutritional dependence on a single variety of grain brought damaging consequences for the wellbeing of humans and harvests alike, making famine and epidemic commonplace. People also fled conscription, invasion and pillage, all very frequent in State-run spaces.

The non-civilised chose their place, their subsistence practice and their social structure in order to maintain their autonomy. **They were not “left” to one side by civilisation, but should rather be seen as adaptations designed to escape both from capture by the State and from the formation of a State.** In other words, these are political adaptations of State-less people to a world which consists of numerous States.

The history of the civilised is the history of the State and of sedentary agriculture. Cereal-growing on fixed fields is the foundation of its power. Peripatetic agriculture, slash-and-burn, was much more widespread in the hills and permitted crop diversity and physical mobility. Sedentary agriculture brought with it property rights, the patriarchal family enterprise, and encouraged big families. Cereal culture is inherently expansionist [*ed. – see the companion piece to **Return Fire vol.3; Colonisation***] and generates a surplus of population and the colonisation of neighbouring land, while being liable to famine and epidemic. However, as they had a constant need to keep the population together for work and war, States had to use generalised slavery to survive as ideological entities.

As a general rule, the social structure in the hills was much more flexible and egalitarian than in the hierarchical and formalised societies of the valleys. The higher the altitude, the less hierarchical and more egalitarian the structure. The inhabitants of the hills paid neither taxes nor tithes. It isn't surprising that they still host separatist movements, struggles for indigenous rights, millenarian rebellions and armed opposition to the States. This resistance can be seen both as a cultural rejection of the patterns of the inhabitants of the plains and as a zone of sanctuary. Many inhabitants fled to the hills to escape State projects in the valleys. The nomadism of the hills is also a strategy of survival and the multiple rebellions of these regions pushed many to seek refuge in even more remote regions. This historical pattern of flight is therefore a stance of opposition if not resistance.

² ed. – see *Return Fire* vol.4 pg51

State Space

As elsewhere, cereals (such as rice) constitute the foundation of State projects. From the perspective of a tax collector, cereals have a considerable advantage over root crops. Cereals grow above the ground and ripen at around the same time. Harvests can therefore be calculated in advance. They have the effect of anchoring populations in a territory and raising their visibility.

The State depends on its capacity to gather crops within a reasonable distance. The further that the place to be controlled lay from its centre, the further the power of the State dwindled. Watercourses were the pre-modern exception to its limits. Before modern technology, it was difficult for States with navigable watercourses to concentrate and project their power and cultural influence. Flat lands thus enabled State control and appropriation (State space), while undulating land is intrinsically resistant to State control (non-State space).

Hills and marshes were sparsely populated and their populations practised forms of mixed agriculture (peripatetic growing of mountain rice and root vegetables, gathering, fishing and hunting) which were hard to assess and even harder to appropriate. Before modern technology, the state was a seasonal phenomenon in the hills; in the rainy season, from May to October, the rain rendered the roads impassable, making year-round military occupation impossible. **The inhabitants of the hills also knew when to expect the arrival of the armies and the tax collectors. These people had only to wait for the rainy season, when the supply routes were broken (or more readily sabotaged) and for the garrison to be facing famine or in retreat.** The coercive presence of the State in these zones was episodic, or practically non-existent.

Concentration of Workforce & Cereals

Political and military supremacy calls for a concentration of the workforce within reaching distance. The concentration of the workforce is only possible with sedentary agriculture. And such agro-ecological concentration is only possible with the irrigated growing of rice (or other cereals). This constitutes the most efficient means of concentrating workforce and foodstuff. The two other means of achieving this are the taking of slaves and pillage.

Peripatetic agriculture offers a greater return for less effort and produces a considerable surplus for the families which practise it. This type of growing disperses people across a territory, forming a constraint to the State's need to concentrate the population and making it difficult and costly to collect the food. Unlike monoculture, mixed and dispersed agriculture ensures nutritional balance and offers greater resilience to diseases and pests than does monoculture. Moreover, farm animals transmit numerous illnesses to humans. Overall, monoculture provides a diet that is nutritionally inferior to a mixed diet. However, rice alone could not support a denser population, but did mean the population was more readily mobilised when required for feudal labour or war.

The growth of population by means of war and slave-raids is considered to be at the origin of social hierarchy and the centralisation of the first States. Kingdoms expanded their workforce base by forcing prisoners of war to settle in their territory and by kidnapping slaves. Soldiers burned the fields and homes of the captives to stop them from returning there. They razed forests, turning them into fields and drained the marshes. **The majority of royal decrees were against runaway serfs, forbidding them from leaving, from moving home or from ceasing to grow**

cereals. Many subjects were even tattooed to indicate their status and their master. In pre-modern systems, only physical coercion can guarantee property and the accumulation of wealth.

Monoculture encourages social and cultural uniformity on many levels: in the family structure, in the value of child labour, in diet, in architectural styles, in agricultural rituals and in market exchanges. A society shaped by monoculture is easier to watch over, evaluate and tax than a society shaped by agricultural diversity. Empires have tried to eradicate peripatetic agriculture, because its produce was not accessible for State appropriation. In modern times, two other reasons have pushed States to eradicate peripatetic growing: political security and the control of resources. Peripatetic fields and forests are therefore burned, razed and eventually replaced by mines. States thus minimise the chances of survival for the inhabitants of the hills outside State spaces.

Civilisation & the Ungovernable

The narrative of civilisation is one of development, progress and modernisation. To be civilised is synonymous with being governed: living in a permanent village, cultivating fixed fields, recognising the social hierarchy and practising one of the principal salvation-based religions [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg40*]. In the eyes of the civilised, the level of civilisation can be read by means of altitude: those living on the peaks are the most backward; those living halfway down are slightly more cultured and those who live on the plains and grow rice are the most advanced, albeit still inferior to those living in the heart of the State.

The more you adopt the dominant culture, the higher you raise yourself culturally. Even if you live on a mountain, you are always “higher” in town and “lower” outside. This has nothing to do with altitude, but with cultural elevation. When entire peoples lead, out of choice, a semi-nomadic lifestyle, they are seen as a threat and stigmatised. Social policies and government aid measures are put into place to bring these “uncouth and backward” people back into the fold of civilisation. All those finding refuge among the rebels are associated with a primitive condition, with anarchy.

The Great Wall of China in the north and the Miao walls in the south-west were built not to prevent barbarian invasions but to keep overtaxed peasants from escaping to live with the barbarians. **It’s in the light of administrative control, and not of culture in itself, that we should understand the invention of ethnic categories at the borders.** An ethnic group is no more than a social status, a way of telling whether and how those in question are administered by the State. A barbarian region is thus a political place facing up against the State; it is a social position. The civilised are completely incorporated into the State and have adopted the customs, the habits and the language of the dominant group. Going off to live with the barbarians was less the exception than the norm; if you left the State space you were in a political space that was free and autonomous.

Keeping the State Out of Reach: Populating the Hills

Mountain people can be seen as refugees displaced by war and choosing to stay out of the direct control of State authorities. These authorities tried to control the periphery by grabbing the fruits of their labour, taxing their resources and by recruiting soldiers, servants, concubines and slaves.

The history of their flight is recalled annually by the mountain folk with various rituals and their traditions are culturally encoded within a strong tradition of familial and economic autonomy. The valleys can revert to the characteristics of the social life of the hills following a collapse of empire. Empires fear these latent forces on their borders and have constantly launched campaigns of assimilation or extermination, particularly after popular insurrections.

The principal reason for flight was war; when entire armies go on the pillage, destroying everything in their path, capturing slaves and raping, the inhabitants of the valleys are pushed out towards zones beyond the reach of the State. Banditry and revolt were widespread practices, but the typical response was to escape into a remote zone where the coercive force of the State was the least felt, while the elites moved towards the centre. Those withdrawing towards the mountains saw there a significant natural advantage. They could, at any moment, block the various accesses and, when necessary, withdraw even deeper into the mountains. **Mountains favour defensive warfare in general and provide countless sites where small groups can hold off a much bigger force.** They can also destroy bridges, prepare ambushes or booby-traps, bring trees down across roads, cut phone and telegraph lines, etc.

Escape the State. Prevent the State.

Those who try to escape the State can use several strategies: fleeing into inaccessible zones, scattering and dividing into smaller groups and adopting subsistence techniques which are invisible and low-profile. In other words, when a society or part of a society chooses to flee from incorporation and appropriation, it moves towards simpler, smaller and more dispersed social entities. These remote regions are thus a choice and part of a strategy enabling people to stay out of reach of the State.

Peripatetic agriculture is a way of escaping the grip of the State. All the representatives of the States of south-east Asia have discouraged or condemned peripatetic agriculture, because it is a fiscally barren form: diversified, dispersed, difficult to watch over, to tax and to confiscate. Peripatetic agriculture offers relative freedom and autonomy. By growing root vegetables, hunting and fishing, nobody needs to work for a wage.

Tribes and States are mutually constituted entities. There is no sequence of evolution; tribes do not precede States. They are social form defined by their relation to the State. And when there is a hierarchy in a tribe, it is often a theatrical performance by a group to adapt to its relationship with the State. The position of the hill-dwellers is that of equality, autonomy and mobility. Amongst the Kachin gumlao, there is a tradition of assassinating, deposing or abandoning more autocratic chiefs. They have a long history of applying egalitarian social relationships by deposing or killing chiefs with over-large ambitions for governing. The Lisu, Lahu, Karen, Kayah and Kachin are known for their tradition of anti-chief rebellion.

But it is flight, rather than rebellion, which was the foundation of freedom in the hills: many more egalitarian communities were founded by fugitives than by revolutionaries.

The Invention of Ethnic & Tribal Identities

Ethnic identity is defined by the mode of subsistence and the belonging or non-belonging to a State; it is a social position regards the State. It is a sort of cultural phenomenon. States are

made up of prisoners and slaves and slavery is primarily an urban phenomenon. The slave-raids at the periphery were aimed against the hunter-gatherer and horticulturist animists [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg40*] so as to deport them towards the needs of the centre. Seeing as most of the town-dwellers originally came from the hills, do they really share an ethnic identity?

The Karen people and many other minorities seem to be *ethnically chameleon*, capable of passing from one identity to another without problems. Living close to a diversity of cultures, ethnic chameleons learn the performances required by each of the cultural paradigms. For example, the Lua/Lawa, who are animists, who practise peripatetic agriculture and speak a Mon-Khmer language at home, are skilled in the Thai language when they move into the valleys. Ethnicity is thus a self-made project; those who adopt a specific identity become members of the identity in question. Ethnicities in the hills are not rigid, but are deployed in the aim of incorporating neighbouring populations. The area has been populated for 2,000 years by wave after wave of people fleeing State centres, invasions, slavers' raids, epidemics and feudal demands. There they joined localised populations in hilly and relatively isolated areas. They accentuated the phenomenon of complex dialects, customs and identities.

The identities found in the hills represent a position against the States of the valleys. They have been put into the service of autonomy and the absence of State. The anti-State identity is perhaps the most common foundation of mountain identities up until the 20th century, when a life outside the State was still possible.

States assimilated all the persons that they captured, but the culture under a State barely altered as a result because the dependence on just one kind of cereal crop ended up dominating the work routines of a majority of the people. The homogenising effects of an agricultural system and a class structure were often punctuated by revolts, reproducing the previous social order under a new administration. The only structural alternative was flight towards the communal properties in the hills.

Porous, Plural & Fluid Identities

Most of the hill peoples of south-east Asia didn't have what we regard as proper ethnic identities. They identified themselves often by the name of a place – the people of this or that valley or catchment basin – or by a lineage or family group. Their identity varied according to the person they were addressing. **Many names were implicitly relational – the people from up high, the people of the western ridge – making sense only as an element in the relational whole.** Others names used were those given by foreigners, as was the case with the Miao. Most of the hill-dwellers had a repertoire of identities which they could use according to context. A person's ethnic identity would be in a sense the repertoire of their possible performances and the contexts in which they were displayed. Ethnicity is not a given, but a choice.

Across the world, colonial forces have identified and codified customs and traditions with the aim of using them as the basis for indirect power via the nomination of chiefs. This technique involves not only new fixed identities, but assumes a mainly hierarchical and universal order. Egalitarian and chameleon peoples without chiefs or permanent political order beyond the hamlet or the family line have no place in this order of things.

There was a lack of institutional levers by which they could be governed. These institutions were introduced by force. For example, in their dealings with the Kachin, Lahu, PaO, Padaung

and Kayah, the British handed institutional power and privileges to a few local chiefs so as to control them better.

In any case, once it has been invented the tribe takes on a life of its own. An entity created as a political structure in order to govern has turned into an expression of political protest and self-affirmation. It has become the recognised means of stating a claim regarding one's autonomy, natural resources [sic] or the earth. Confronted by peoples without a State, the State only recognises claims based on ethnic identities and tribal rights.

It's the standard mode of making claims to States and answers the same needs as a trade union or association in contemporary society. The more you look at the reality behind the concept of the tribe, the more it seems to be the creation of the white man [sic] to describe indigenous people, to be able to negotiate with them, administer them, encourage them to think in the same way. The invention of the tribe must be understood as a *political project*.³

The vagueness of social forms in the hills, the historical and genealogical flexibility and the baroque complexity of languages and populations, all form part of the constitutive characteristics of hill societies.

³ The creation of the Cossacks as a self-conscious ethnicity is particularly instructive in grasping this phenomenon. Those who became Cossacks were fugitives and serfs who fled western Russia in the 16th century for the steppes of the River Don so as to escape social control. They had nothing in common with each other, apart from their servitude and their flight. They were geographically fragmented into 22 groups. They became a people because of the new environmental conditions and subsistence routines. They established themselves alongside Tatars, Circassians and Kalmyks. They lived by a communal land system, were egalitarian and had total freedom of movement. Cossack society was thus a mirror image of the servitude and hierarchy of tsarist Russia. The three big revolts which threatened the empire started in Cossack lands. After the failure of the Bulavin Rebellion (1707-8), the Cossacks were forced to provide the tsarist army with cavalry units in exchange for the preservation of their autonomy. And after the defeat of Pugachev's Rebellion (1773-74), their local democratic assemblies were replaced by a Cossack aristocracy.

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