

Agency, Identity, and Place:

James Scott and the Place-Specific Social Construction of Ethnic Identity

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between agency, geography, and identity within James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott claims that the actions of hill peoples within the historical record and in mundane facts of everyday life reveal a pattern of state evasion. He further argues that these patterns can become the foundation of ethnic identities. He suggests therefore that choices reveal attitudes towards the state and that identity is constructed around these attitudes. Critics of Scott question his reasoning, suggesting that he is arguing for geographic determinism, despite his claims to the contrary.

This paper defends the central argument of *The Art*, but also argues that Scott's reasoning has limits. In particular, I argue that the inference of agency (based on the interpretation of historical records or everyday life) should be framed as contingent and constrained by social and temporal factors. As such, agency is exercise within a field of continuously shifting options. Decisions about where to live are therefore largely decisions about future options. The paper concludes with a brief exploration of my argument's implications for the use of interpretive methods to understand peoples' relationships to the state and politics more broadly.

The Problem

James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* has been controversial. These criticisms have centered around Scott's interpretation of agency and its implications for research methods and social science scholarship more generally. This controversy is important because it calls into question Scott's conclusions in *The Art* and the use of methods that rely on the inference of agency more broadly. Furthermore, Scott links his conclusions in *The Art* to the social construction of identity as a place-specific phenomenon. Therefore, the criticisms of Scott indirectly question whether agency relates to the social construction of identity.

In *The Art*, Scott argues that some people chose to join early states and others were forced to join. Still others sought to avoid coercive states. These refugees from state making would then seek difficult-to-reach places to live, and would adopt practices that made them difficult for states to assimilate. For example, growing root crops complicated taxation and the use of oral traditions made it difficult for would be colonizers to access local records. In Scott's account, people make choices about geography and daily practices. Over time, he argues, the areas people live in and their daily practices become the foundation for a sense of identity (sometimes imposed from outside). Thus decisions about where and how one lives can later turn out to be decisions about identity.

In theory this narrative is reasonable. However, Scott's critics question the validity of inferring the intent to avoid the state from life in remote places or from daily practices. Some of these criticisms are applicable more generally to any method that draws inferences from seemingly mundane observations of daily life. Interpretive methods in particular, such as participant observation, rely on making inferences about people's choices based on facts of

everyday life. This paper will outline the principle criticisms directed at Scott, but will also defend the methods he uses more broadly. By my interpretation of Scott's work, some criticisms are not as problematic as they first appear. However, Scott is silent on some points within my argument, so this exercise will partly reflect my interpretation of Scott and not his own words.

There are three recurring, inter-related critiques of *The Art* that bear repeating here:

- Scott generalizes too broadly – the “birds eye view” of *The Art* misses important distinctions across the regions he discusses.
- His thesis deprives the people on the ground of meaningful agency. “Mountain people” are reified as universally committed to anarchism and avoiding the state, while structural conditions create a deterministic framework for culture, economics, and politics
- Scott too often infers intention from observed behavior. This criticism echoes a criticism of his earlier work, where he suggests that most resistance is invisible to the state and local elites. *The Art* likewise assumes that a person's avoidance of any particular state implies the desire to avoid all states and that living outside state-dominated territory is prima-facie evidence of state avoidance.

All these criticisms are valid to a point. But they hinge largely on a reading of *The Art* that I dispute. There are two projects within *The Art* that need to be thought about separately. First, Scott reverses what he sees as the traditional narrative of the state and then he explores the possibility that the physical geography of remote places facilitated resistance to the state. The first project, the reversal of the pro-state narrative, begins with the observation that the state, has a preference for record keeping and the accumulation of information, while those who would avoid the state are less obsessed with record keeping. They may intentionally avoid keeping records that could subsequently prove useful to a conquering power. Scott therefore argues that written histories tend to be inherently biased because of the paucity of

information about people and areas not controlled, or controlled very loosely, by the state. Therefore, he asserts, official histories have tended to extol the virtues and accomplishments of states, obscuring the negative consequences of state-making and ignoring the people who actively chose to avoid the state. Scott argues that where historical records are non-existent, it is safer to assume resistance to the state than accidental exclusion from the state. Hill peoples are not then the unfortunate remnant of a shared barbaric past. They are in fact the products of resistance to the state. State and non-state areas, which Scott views as falling along the same lines as barbarous and civilized areas, are mutually constitutive—they produce each other. He interprets the features of hill life that seem primitive and backward as forms of resistance to the state.

This, I argue, is a deliberately provocative component of this work and should be viewed as a kind of thought experiment. In other words, the more provocative and sweeping generalizations in *The Art* reflect Scott's intentional reversal of the traditional pro-state narrative and his effort to see what the world looks like from the opposite perspective. To make his case, he describes a set of historical and geographic circumstances that simultaneously maximize the oppressive nature of the state and the capacity of people to escape that state. This is not, by my reading, intended to convince the reader that his binary description conveys reality in all cases. Rather the exercise is intended to cast doubt on the excesses of pro-state narratives.

At the same time, *The Art* makes some explicit claims about the state's relationship with physical geography. These claims suggest a general theory about the relationship between the state and remote populations in mountainous zones. What distinguishes this

theory from some conceptualizations of the constraints of geography, is the extent to which it takes seriously the capacity of people to move from one place to another – from one set of constraints to another. While some of Scott's critics argue that *The Art* ignores agency and promotes a deterministic view of geography, I contend that agency¹ is central to his argument. Taking the mobility of people seriously unhinges many, though not all, of the assumptions inherent in the accusation of geographical determinism. This reading of Scott can account for the apparent paradox of an approach that emphasizes both agency and situational constraints.

The broader importance of Scott's work in *The Art* is its challenge to theoretical and empirical works that have centered the state and sidelined those living outside the state. This should deflate some of the criticism leveled against *The Art*. While some critics have read Scott as offering a universal theory of the state and resistance to the state, I read Scott as advancing a theory of resistance to the state that challenges the pro-state narrative that emerged initially as a function of the state's obsession with record keeping. Scott suggests that because the state preferred legible data and because non-state peoples chose to rely on local knowledge and oral histories, surviving written data are inherently skewed towards the state's perspective. These records form the foundation for much of the historical and social science scholarship that follows. This has created a skewed account of the history of state making. Scott wishes to challenge that unseen bias. He does not claim to advance a universal

¹ The definition of agency is clearly a contested one and will be examined more fully as the argument progresses. However, pending that discussion I use the term generally to denote the actions of actors where the outcome is not completely predetermined. For a more complete discussion of potential complexities of the concept see: Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023, doi:10.1086/231294.

theory that explains all cases. Rather he provides some examples of state evasion that illustrate the plausibility of alternative readings of state and non-state identities. The central narrative is critical, rather than empirical.

One commentator has described Scott as the “un-Hobbes,”² and has read Scott not only as a challenger to one common theoretical narrative of the state, but also as a critic of the concurrent narrative on the state of nature.³ Therefore, Scott's project is a counter-narrative that assumes a sweeping, macro-historical vantage point. Embedded in Scott's narrative is a theory about geography, agency, and the state. The danger inherent in this project, as many of Scott's critics point out, is an uncritical acceptance of a binary view of the world. This can be bad social science because states vary, as do the people who resist states. Additionally, a binary view can have negative real-world consequences, such as the abandonment of the very notion of progress.⁴ By this argument, thinking of rural life, subsistence agriculture, and illiteracy as choices suggests that no form of development should be encouraged. Of course, this is a consequentialist critique because it suggests Scott's position ought to be rejected because it may lead to bad conclusions. This type of argument assumes a normative position that Scott might dispute – that development is good and that we ought to reject anything contrary to that assumption. While I argue that the binary and historical nature of Scott's argument is largely polemical, the theory of geography, agency, and the state has real-world purchase, particularly the theory is removed from a binary, completely historical framework.

² Stephen D. Krasner, “State, Power, Anarchism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 79–83, doi:10.1017/S1537592710003312.

³ Peter Manicas, “State, Power, Anarchism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 92–98. ; Neil Roberts, “State, Power, Anarchism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 84–88. ; Krasner, “State, Power, Anarchism.”

⁴ Tom Brass, “Scott’s ‘Zomia,’ or a Populist Post-Modern History of Nowhere,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 123–33.

In one specific case, historical records suggest some Ngöbe people of Panama fled the post-conquest state making project, lived in the hills, and maintained their identity as a distinct group thereafter.⁵ Other Ngöbe chose to remain on the plains and were latinized.⁶ The lines of identity were then drawn, over time, between the hills and the plains.⁷ In other cases, it seems that individuals from the latinized population decided to join the Ngöbe and assimilate to their way of life.⁸ Faced with the case of the Ngöbe a number of questions arise. What was the intention of the Ngöbe who avoided the state? Was that intention somehow embedded in Ngöbe society in a way that promotes ongoing resistance to the state? More generally, how should we interpret actions within the historical record, or the observable actions of daily life today? In Scott's narrative, choices about place determine future identity. If so, can a choice about where one lives be interpreted as a choice to adhere to (or avoid) a given identity? Scott's critics would suggest that such inferences go to far.

Scott and His Critics

By way of answering the three critiques mentioned above, I will explicate my reading of Scott's implicit theory of geography, agency, and the state. To begin I will lay out each of the critiques of *The Art* in greater detail:

Scott generalizes too broadly – the “birds eye view” of The Art misses important distinctions across the

⁵ Young, *Ngawbe*, 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

⁷ Gjording, *Conditions Not of Their Choosing*, 41–42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 200–201.

regions he discusses

The most basic criticism of *The Art* is that it assumes too much of a “bird's eye view”⁹ of hill peoples, the state, and resistance to the state. Scott's critics suggest that, in contrast to his earlier work, his narrative constructs a sweeping, all-encompassing account of the state that ignores the finer details of particular situations. They suggest that Scott overlooks or ignores counter-examples within the region he is discussing. Scott argues that decentralized economic, and political practices, such as decision making by consensus, communal land tenure, and subsistence agriculture, which result in socially constructed ethnic identities, are methods of resistance to the state. They allow people outside the state to avoid legible, centralized control. However, some readers have pointed out that even in the absence of an impinging state, some mountainous regions, like those in Borneo and Papua New Guinea, show the same phenomena that Scott attributes to state resistance.¹⁰ In other cases, as with the Wa people between Burma and China, the evidence seems to be mixed. The Wa themselves commit many of the abuses that Scott attributes to the state and develop stratified, predatory societies.¹¹ Such examples suggest that Scott overreaches in *The Art* even where there are historical records of non-state peoples' lives. His claims are even less plausible where hard evidence of direct resistance to the state is missing and other plausible explanations for hill peoples' behavior exist. For example, some readers find Scott's suggestion that the absence of

⁹ Nicola Tannenbaum, “The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia by James C. Scott,” *Journal of Regional Science* 51, no. 4 (2011): 836–838.

¹⁰ Tom Brass, “Scott's ‘Zomia,’ or a Populist Post-Modern History of Nowhere,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 123–33.; Nicola Tannenbaum, “The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia by James C. Scott,” *Journal of Regional Science* 51, no. 4 (2011): 836–38.; Victor Lieberman, “A Zone of Refuge in Southeast Asia? Reconceptualizing Interior Spaces,” *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 02 (2010): 333–46. ; Shalini Randeria, “The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 51, no. 3 (December 2010): 464–69.

¹¹ Magnus Fiskesjö, “Mining, History, and the Anti-State Wa: The Politics of Autonomy between Burma and China,” *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 2 (2010): 241–64.

reading and writing among mountain people reflects an intentional wish to avoid literacy far-fetched.¹² The lack of literacy in remote areas seems better explained by remote peoples' lack of resources and scant contact with the outside world. Others readers accept that social, economic, and political pressures on hill people tend to originate in the valleys, but recommend greater scholarly sensitivity to the variety of pressures, because not all such pressure is state-driven.¹³

Scott's thesis deprives the people on the ground of real agency. "Mountain people" are reified as universally committed to anarchism and avoiding the state, while structural conditions create a deterministic framework for culture, economics, and politics.

Some readers argue that over his career Scott has moved from ethnographic observation towards an analysis of constraints and instrumental choice.¹⁴ Ironically, while some see the restoration of agency to those outside state spaces (hill people, swamp people, etc.) as Scott's central project, other readers conclude that mountain people have lost all agency in Scott's account. This is to say, Scott originally posited that those at the margins of the state are not simply carried along by events beyond their control, but are making choices among available options. These choices, he has argued, reveal local resistance to the imposition of a state-based order. His critics suggest that in *The Art* he has done the opposite,

This is, indeed a bird's eye view; there are no people here, just the vast sweep of states and flight from states. Although upland political, social, and economic organizations are phrased as active choices, we actually have very little sense of anyone's agency. Identities and groups are ephemeral, the only

¹² Randeria and Scott, "The Art of Not Being Governed."

¹³ Lieberman, "A Zone of Refuge in Southeast Asia?"

¹⁴ Dimitri della Faille, "Discourse Analysis in International Development Studies: Mapping Some Contemporary Contributions," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 6, no. 3 (2011): 215–35, doi:10.1080/17447143.2011.594512; Brass, "Scott's 'Zomia,' or a Populist Post-Modern History of Nowhere."

persistent actor is the state. But just as with the upland peoples, the various premodern states in Southeast Asia and China are collapsed into the singular "state."¹⁵

In other words, Scott points to a set of patterns that demonstrate a general trend. He does not point to "active choices" at the individual level. What is missing, according to this criticism, is a record of a consideration of options by individuals who then select among them.

What this might mean in practice is unclear. For example, during the early days of the Spanish conquest, some Ngöbe people had been forced to live in mission towns in rural Panama. These indigenes decided to burn their houses down and escape into the Chiriqui mountains. Scott would assume that these Ngöbe had decided that the less sophisticated life of the hills was preferable to the state-dominated life of the plains. His critics would point out that there is no proof of debate among the Ngöbe, no report of a group vote, nor memoirs of deliberation to establish their exact motivation. It is a fair point that one cannot conclude that all Ngöbe chose to avoid state making (in general), or even that all Ngöbe in this particular group had made an "active choice" to burn their houses and escape. However, it is equally absurd to maintain that such actions say nothing about some Ngöbe making choices about their lives. While Scott's critics seek documentation of "active" choices, and presumably, explicit, conscious decision making, Scott is less explicit about the decision making process (it could be implicit, heuristic, or even exercised collectively). He asserts that patterns of evidence can be read to suggest overall trends that are the product of decisions.

While Scott claims to engage in a radically constructivist explanation of hill people's lives, some readers argue his account "accords more with an instrumental rather than a

¹⁵ Tannenbaum, "The Art of Not Being Governed."

constructivist account.”¹⁶ That is to say, while Scott maintains that much of the social and political world is the product of our own concepts and categories, his use of geographic constraints to explain choices assumes that people must deal with a predetermined reality. This suggests that mountain people are defined by their circumstances. Therefore, individual agency is not particularly relevant.

Yet it is not clear that individual, constrained choice and a constructivist understanding of the social and political world are really opposed. In the short term people may be forced to make decisions based on their immediate circumstances. This requires a kind of instrumental calculation. The cumulative effect of those decisions defines the social and political world that will condition future decisions. In fact, Scott seems to be making just such an argument. Using again the example of the Ngobe, who resisted conversion and forced urbanization, it could be said that they burned down and abandoned their homes on the basis of situational constraints. This could even be framed as an instrumental choice: oppression and forced Christianization were rejected in favor of liberty and traditional ways in the hills. Such a view is consistent with the social construction of identity, whereby 'Ngobe' was reserved for the people of the hills who avoided Latino ways, while those indigenes who remained in the missions were considered 'Latino.' To argue that ethnicity is the product of social construction does not suggest that people do not function under real constraints, or that they do not make decisions. Rather the claim is that in their decision making, people can challenge their constraints, and over time, such constraints can be influenced by the decisions made. In short, Scott's critics impose a standard of agency that demands too much of the

¹⁶ Anne Clunan, “State, Power, Anarchism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 99–102.

historical record, and these same critics suggest an internal conflict in Scott's argument based on a false dichotomy between instrumental agency and social construction.

Scott too often infers intention from observed behavior. This criticism echoes a criticism of his earlier work, where he suggests that most resistance is invisible to the state and local elites. The Art likewise assumes that a person's avoidance of any particular state implies the desire to avoid all states and that living outside state-dominated territory is prima-facie evidence of state avoidance/Anarchism.

Some critics of *The Art* argue that Scott wrongly attributes specific beliefs to people based on their observed behavior. While Scott pushed for the incorporation of ethnographic observation and anthropological theory into political science¹⁷, he has been criticized for using such methods too loosely.¹⁸ For example, critics have questioned Scott's labeling of people who resist any state as anarchists. Such labeling ignores the possibility that resistance to a given state does not imply a of rejection state-like authority in general.¹⁹ In fact, people who resist a state seen as foreign may be perfectly willing to form a state of their own.

Some political scientists, even ethnographers, also dispute Scott's "assertion that ethnography reveals intentions or that intentions are graspable".²⁰ Ideology is even more opaque, as it speaks not only to momentary intention, but instead to systems of values that are presumed to be stable over longer periods of time. One variation on this criticism of Scott points out the problematic nature of Scott's distinction between "onstage" and "offstage" and

¹⁷ Lisa Wedeen, "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (2010): 255–72, doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.052706.123951.

¹⁸ Brass, "Scott's 'Zomia,' or a Populist Post-Modern History of Nowhere."

¹⁹ Shane Barter, "The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia, James C. Scott, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, Pp. Xvii, 442.," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 44, no. 4 (2011): 958–59, doi:10.1017/S0008423911000886; Brass, "Scott's 'Zomia,' or a Populist Post-Modern History of Nowhere."

²⁰ Wedeen, "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science." 259.

the implicit assumption of an “authentic” self.²¹ The attribution of a stable ideological disposition to an actor assumes that there is a stable identity behind the various roles that people play in day-to-day life, instead of assuming that these roles constitute the self. For example, Scott would (likely) argue that the Ngobe who burned their houses had an underlying anarchist impulse to resist the state, which in turn shaped the kinds of arrangements they were willing to tolerate in the hills. Those who question the idea of a stable, authentic “offstage” self might counter that the indigenes compliance with the Spanish regime before they burned their houses could be as authentic as their act of resistance (i.e. there is no stable underlying identity).

Response to the Critiques

These three critiques raise questions about the scale of Scott's argument, about his assumptions regarding the intentions of actors, and about the role of agency versus constraint in *The Art*. To answer these points, I will expand on my reading of Scott's theory of agency.

Peter Manicas suggests that Scott has a coherent “metatheory,” by which Manicas means,

an approach to inquiry, including assumptions about epistemology, the role of theory, and the nature of evidence – the “ontology” of society, how it is to be conceived, whether it has a sui-generic existence or has, rather, a virtual existence, incarnate in the actions of persons. A metatheory also includes assumptions in the “philosophy” of history – whether, for example, history is filled with contingencies or whether things are pretty much “determined” – and, lastly, assumptions about how explanation is conceived.²²

Manicas suggests, and I agree, that Scott places agency at the center of human experience.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Manicas, “State, Power, Anarchism,” 93.

Although, all choices are made under physical, social, and historical constraints, and all choices are influenced by beliefs about the world.²³ In the *The Art* Scott tends to generalize about these constraints (mainly geographic) and beliefs (anarchism) in a way that some of his critics consider “deterministic”. Specifically, they suggest that in *The Art*, topography produces culture, with little room for individual choice. However, I interpret broad claims about anarchism as a deliberately provocative element in Scott's work. He intends to demonstrate not so much the universality of highland anarchism as to challenge a more enthusiastic narrative of the state. Scott asks, in the absence of clear historical records, is there reason to prefer one meta-narrative over the other?

I assert that Scott presents his portrayal of the conflict between flatland states and hill peoples as a critique of a state-centric view of history. It is clear that Scott does not see the state or non-state peoples in such simplistic terms. For example, in *The Art* he discusses situations where the state diverges from heavy handed conquest and relies on economic and symbolic power. In other works, such as *Seeing Like A State*, he discusses the ways that civil society can constrain the worst excesses of the state. The binary distinctions between hills and valleys, state-affiliated and non-state, presents an idealized version of the confrontation between hill people and emerging states. Therefore, in situations where the state and non-state peoples diverge from Scott's ideal, one should reframe Scott's argument with more attention to possible variations in local circumstances.

Still, it is necessary to address the relationship between the constraints imposed by physical geography and the range of choices available to a given actor, or in Scott's language

²³ Manicas, “State, Power, Anarchism.”

a 'situational logic.' According to some of Scott's critics, his argument devolves into geographic determinism. It is therefore worthwhile to address the relationship between agency and physical geography in *The Art and Seeing*. Scott is not always clear about the general inter-relation of agency, institutions, and geographical constraints. But as Paul Pierson notes, political phenomena can be divided into four quadrants based on the time horizon of a phenomenon's causes. Pierson describes these quadrants as being analogous to tornadoes (sudden causes with immediate effects), meteorite/extinction events (sudden causes with long-term effects), earthquakes (a slow moving cause with sudden effects), and global warming (a slow moving cause with long term effects). He suggests that political science tends to gravitate towards events like tornadoes, which occur all at once and have immediate effects. The discipline neglects other types of explanations.²⁴ According to Pierson, this tendency to focus on sudden causes with immediate effects comes from political scientists' desire to emulate physical sciences and the logic of experimentation. Arguments that rely on geographic determinism, by contrast, would likely fall into the last quadrant – analogous to global warming. Scott's argument, as I see it, does not fall neatly into any of the above quadrants. But Scott shares Pierson's concern over the narrowing of what we think of as political science. Understanding how Pierson's categories relate to the discipline helps to illustrate how Scott's depiction of choice and geography can be misunderstood as an argument for environmental determinism.

Some critics of *The Art* suggest that it presents a 'topography produces culture'

²⁴ Pierson, Paul, "Big, Slow-Moving, and...Invisible: Macrosocial Process in the Study of Comparative Politics," in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 178-180.

argument. Allegedly, topography is an underlying constraint that inevitably produces what Scott describes as anti-state barbarism (in other words, a slow moving cause with a long-term effect). This does not seem to be completely unfair. Scott does argue that a mountain range or an open plain limits the options for state formation or state avoidance. However Scott's central point is that people can choose to move to another location. Moreover, some actors, particularly states, alter the natural environment. So, a fair analysis of Scott must take into account his emphasis on the ability of people to move and the possibility of human intervention in the natural environment. Those who accuse Scott of engaging in environmental determinism miss this point and instead attempt to lump Scott with discredited ideas related to Spencerian interpretations of geography²⁵. In Spencerian conceptions of geography, institutions, and agency can be thought of in terms of a theater. The building that houses the theater constrains happenings inside the theater. The size of the building limits the size of the stage and the maximum number of seats, while the configuration of the building limits the position of these elements. The size and shape of the stage constrains the scenery and the types of productions that are feasible. Scenery, however, can be changed with less effort. Such semi-permanent elements are perhaps analogous to institutions. Within the constraints of the scenery and stage, the actors perform their roles according to a series of scripts and conventions, analogous to informal institutions. Within those roles they might interpret or improvise – in other words, exercise agency. The Spencerian view tends to focus on larger constraints and therefore tends to diminish the

²⁵ For a more complete discussion of the origin of environmental determinism and alternative interpretations of the relationship between physical geography and society see Richard Peet, "The Social Origins of Environmental Determinism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75, no. 3 (September 1985): 309–33.

possibility of agency. By contrast, those who oppose this Spencerian view tend to downplay geographic constraints and emphasize agency. They argue that human existence resembles an improvisational group that performs open-air theater. The agency of the actors determines almost everything. The few constraints that exist can be worked around in a number of ways.

In *The Art*, Scott depicts a world in which people can choose a geographic location and the constraints that accompany that location. To extend the analogy, Scott contends that there is a choice between theaters. The actors and the spectators may be vested in staying in a theater once they have paid the price of admission or acquired a place in the troupe. But they can always choose to leave for another theater (or might have choose a different theater in the first place). The commitment of those acting out the play is always higher than the commitment of the audience, which is to suggest that some people are more vested in a political order than others. The more marginal one's role in society, the less is lost through exit. So the audience usually makes short-term commitments in the same way that the most geographically and socially marginal members of a society lack long-term commitments to a place or to the political system governing it. In other words, to the extent that geography constrains the types of political options available to people, that constraint is inherently local, and people might choose a different set of constraints by simply relocating.

I would add that if the state vs. non-state boundary is fuzzy, or the available geography is quite varied, people might choose from a range of locations on a center-periphery continuum. For example, if we take Scott's contention that states "don't climb hills" at face value, we still might find some variation based on the steepness of the hill. A sheer rock-faced cliff would present a more formidable barrier to the advance of the state than

gently rolling foothills that gradually ascend into the mountains. Foothills would present less of an obstacle to the state and a less clear dividing line between state and non-state peoples.

In *Seeing*, Scott also breaks with Spencerian tradition. He describes the state's attempts to remake nature, so that it better conforms to state-friendly institutions and technology (sometimes with disastrous results). To use the analogy of the theater, sometimes a stage is rebuilt to accommodate new scenery and sometimes a theater is rebuilt to accommodate a certain type of stage.

According to Scott, the negation of geographic constraints is only partial. At times states have the capacity and technology to overcome geographic constraints, but there are many situations where the attempt to overcome nature is only partially successful, or even fails abjectly. A mountain path is sometimes converted into a paved road, which makes the adjacent terrain accessible to the state. But the road remains steep nonetheless. Or, the construction of the road itself might change the flow of floodwaters, which later causes the road itself to be washed away. The application of even the most modern infrastructure and technology to a natural terrain is never completely straightforward.

Scott presents geographic locations and the observable practices of local people as the result of active choices to disaffiliate from the state, while the state simultaneously attempts to expand its reach. To the extent that Scott's critics suggest that this is simple geographic, Spencerian determinism, they mischaracterize the relationship between physical geography and human behavior in Scott's work. Scott attributes stable patterns of behavior and ideological commitments (such as anarchism) to people living in the hills, but he is not advocating for geographic determinism. The above argument suggests that the relationship is

bi-directional. The powerless can relocate and the powerful can remake the physical landscape. At the same time, both must respond to what Scott calls the “logic” of their situation. He seems to see long periods of stability, driven by standing constraints, that are punctuated by periods when those constraints shift. This shift frees up other options, and the range of individual or collective choices expands, allowing people who had been excluded from politics to reshape institutional arrangements. These moments of expanded choice are sometimes described by other social scientists as critical junctures.²⁶

All sorts of institutional arrangements (both formal and informal) can be 'sticky,' because the status quo may be comfortable for people or may be preserved by habituation. A decision to avoid incorporation into a state could result in a geographic location and in parallel choices of cultural, political, and economic activities that are state-resistant. For example, Scott suggests that state-averse people will often adopt types of agriculture that are hard to tax, and will avoid keeping written records, such as birth certificates or land deeds, that might be used by the state. The accumulation of multiple choices in an anti-state direction then leads to an established, self-perpetuating pattern shared within a group that eventually identifies as itself as a distinct people. It is reasonable to assume that once such a pattern has been established and linked to a sense of identity, that the identity and the pattern persist on their own.

Scott additionally argues that ethnic identities are often constructed around such practices, rather than the other way around. For example, Scott would argue that the people who live in the hills of Chiriqui and traditionally resisted the state did so not because they

²⁶ Katznelson, Ira, “Periodization and Preferences,” in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

were Ngobe. Rather, they are called Ngobe because they fled to the hills and resisted the state. Conversely, the indigenes who did not resist the state simply became known as Latinos or peasants. It is therefore unclear whether any given individual engages in state-evading practices out of a sense of ethnic identity or from an ongoing commitment to avoid the state.

This I believe is the source of much of the frustration with Scott labeling some people as anarchists. Even if one generation gravitates towards root crops knowing that they are hard to tax, it does not follow that subsequent generations will preserve that practice with the intention of avoiding the state. The 'stickiness' of agricultural, social, and political patterns on account of habit or ethnic identity tends to undermine the inferences about ideological intent or commitment from behavior alone. Indeed, are individuals from peripheral groups today predisposed to avoid and resist the state at all? If so, is it the result of habituation associated with their identity, or are people in hilly areas continuously self-selecting into those places? Could it be a combination of both?

Here Scott's argument becomes unclear. Are those who resist the state passively repeating the scripts handed down to them, or are they actively embracing an inherited way of life to avoid incorporation into the state? From the observation of behavior, the two would likely be indistinguishable, particularly if an initial crisis (such as the conquest of the Americas) left one group of people undisturbed by further encroachment from aggressive states. At the same time, this distinction becomes relevant when states attempt to control more fully territories that they had previously left alone. Then the people living in those remote places face new choices. This is where questions of identity, tradition, and agency

become more salient.²⁷

To this point I have challenged the notion of agency suggested by Scott's critics. I am suggesting that the relationship between geography and choice is bidirectional. Geography constrains the choices available in any given situation, yet people choose between situations (by relocating) and powerful actors (like the state) can attempt to alter geographic features. Scott's critics are also limit their conception of what constitutes agency. I will now develop my own position on links between agency and observable behavior.

Scott attempts to develop a counter-history of hill peoples. His is therefore an explicitly historical account. He buttresses his argument with more recent observations about people living in the hills of the region he calls Zomia. He argues that what has frequently been seen as "barbarism" is often quite deliberate. States use "civilization" as a rhetorical tool to impose their own order. There are a number of more complicated things going on behind the scenes in this simplified account.

For Scott the substitution of universal technology for local knowledge lies at the heart of civilization. Thus, civilization is inevitably linked to the state. Paved all-weather roads allow for remote places to be linked to commercial and administrative hubs. Roads are therefore associated with civilization and the state. Earlier footpaths are associated with local knowledge of the terrain and therefore with barbarism. According to Scott, when one chooses to move away from paved roads and to use footpaths, one is intentionally evading civilization and the state. Similarly, civilization substitutes single-crop agriculture for knowledge of hundreds of local plants, substitutes written records for oral traditions,

²⁷ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (University of California Press, 1975).

substitutes centralized religion for animism, substitutes commercially valuable trees for ones with medicinal and other uses, and so on. To put it more simply, civilization opens the window to universal technology, which gives more power to the centralized state, and which closes the window on an intimate and symbiotic link between humans and nature. Scott's anti-state barbarism is therefore a way of living in which the natural environment provides a starting point for human activities, such as agriculture, architecture, and transportation. The resulting way of living is innovated from the ground up, while the state seeks to impose order from the top down. The anti-state people in Scott's account can be connected to a series of very specific and unique places, while the state views territory as a blank slate on which projects are deployed.

Another way to describe this would be to say that for Scott, groups and individuals under barbarism make their own rules. Under civilization, the rules are set and standardized by the state. To adopt the technology of a civilization (roadways, crop monoculture, etc.) is to accept the domination of the state over a territory. Rejecting that technology through relocation is to resist the state through avoidance. This resistance was easiest, by Scott's account, in places the state could not function well, such as mountains, swamps, and jungles. Inside state-controlled territory, the options for resistance did not evaporate completely, but simple evasion was no longer an option.²⁸

In *The Art*, a way of life is itself a form of resistance. Understanding the relationship between resistance, on the one hand, and civilization, on the other, is key to unraveling Scott's

²⁸ See, James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Revised ed. edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), and James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Reprint edition (Princeton, N.J.: Yale University Press, 1987).

argument. Resistance is a manifestation of agency and expresses choice between options, desires of some kind, and is not completely predetermined.

However I would add that a complete discussion of agency should include the temporal dimension as well as awareness of the social character of human behavior.²⁹ For example the Ngobe who burned their houses and retreated to the hills were thinking about the past, present, and future at the moment when the fire was lit and they passed the torches around. During that moment, each person would be aware of their past habits and routines. This would include life before the Spanish in a different home with different norms, followed by life in the mission town and the daily routines and expectations that accompanied the home residents were now about to burn. In addition, each of the Ngobe would be aware of the present, such as the developing contingencies of their planned escape, the likely actions of the Spanish, the direction of the wind, and other current conditions. Each person would also be thinking about the future – the flight into the hills, the proposed route, the place to settle, and dreams about future life. Lastly, each individual would be conscious of the actions of their companions and would adjust to the actions of their companions as they occurred. For example, the general sense of resolve among the Ngobe would affect the likelihood of group cohesion in following through with the escape.

Such a view of agency complicates the task of identifying intent from observed behavior. This is the critique advanced by some of Scott's critics. However, if agency is an emergent phenomenon, intent at any given moment may not be the most relevant piece of information for social scientists. If the goal is to understand why people act the way they do

²⁹ Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?"

over the long haul, then we should be concerned about the way small decisions add up over time. Some of the Ngobe who burned their homes may have intended to prevent the Spanish from using the buildings to recruit fresh indigenes to the community. Others may have wanted to assure that they would not falter in the exodus and seek to return. Or, it is possible that they began burning houses with one set of intentions and continued with a different set. It is not clear that any of the fleeing Ngobe envisioned an anarchist utopia in the hills. They may have been completely uncertain about the future.

To link behavior closely with intention is suspect to say the least. However, I believe that Scott is aiming for something more general. He is arguing that historically many people have preferred to avoid the state, particularly when faced with oppressive early states that relied on forced labor. Such a claim can reasonably be made. Intention, while potentially important, is always contingent on future unforeseen developments. As such, the intentions that guide our actions frequently have the quality of aspirations or even daydreams.

Given that present actions are always partly oriented towards an uncertain future, I would suggest that the most relevant point for Scott's analysis is an account of future options. We might expect people, facing an uncertain future, to make decisions that best preserve their future options. The Ngobe who stayed in mission towns and became Latinos did not necessarily have assimilation as their ultimate goal. Nor did they know their eventual fate. Rather, they preferred the set of future options that they thought the mission town would offer. Conversely, the Ngobe who abandoned the mission towns and fled into the hills may not have had any ideas about either the future evolution of the Panamanian state or their descendants' attitudes towards that state. But by moving into the hills, they preserved the

option of avoiding the state for themselves and for subsequent generations.

Therefore, the most defensible interpretation of Scott's position, as I see it, is not to assume that geography dictates an anarchist world view or that daily life away from the state is always equivalent to active resistance. Rather, living in a remote area *preserves the option* of resisting or opting out from the state. The decision at any given point is not necessarily whether to oppose the state or not, but whether to form new relationships with and dependencies on the state that will prejudice the future ability to opt out.

By my reading, Scott reverses the polarity of the binary distinction between barbarism and civilization as a provocative or polemical move that disturbs how we look at people living outside of the state's grasp. Barbarism becomes more attractive than civilization for those who value freedom and who seek to preserve their future options. Scott produces a narrative that is consistent with the skeletal facts that have survived about hill peoples and that is just as plausible as the pro-state argument that sees all people desiring life within civilization. In the absence of well-documented written histories that point in one direction or another, Scott argues that the anti-state narrative is more compelling as a starting point for inquiry.

The polemic component of *The Art* challenges existing ideas about the relationship between the state and people at the margins of the state. Scott never claims to reveal startling new facts in *The Art*. He openly admits that his book is an exercise in re-reading the accepted histories of the area he calls Zomia. However, having articulated the counter-narrative, he points the reader towards a more subtle interplay between the state and non-state peoples, if one takes agency seriously.

As articulated above, if we accept that agency is exercised in emergent and social contexts, and if we accept that presence of the state is variable (one could be within the occasional economic reach of traders from a given state, but effectively out of reach for the military), then the decision to accept or avoid the state is complicated. A person might move to an area close enough to the state-affiliated communities to enjoy access markets, but live far enough away to avoid the police. One might maintain access to state benefits while simultaneously minimizing the risk of future entanglements with the authorities.

Thinking seriously about agency, it is difficult to ascribe intentional evasion of the state to all hill people (or swamp people, or forest people, etc.) throughout history. However, it is reasonable to take two points from Scott's argument. First, electing to move away from the state in one generation (and then establishing economic, social, and agricultural patterns of living that are not state-friendly) preserves the future ability of a people to evade the state. Second, geographic constraints are real, but human agency can trump geographic constraint under some circumstances.

Implications for Research Methods

The above argument suggests that it is difficult and questionable to infer intent from any given action. However, momentary intent is not necessarily the determining characteristic of agency. I have also argued that agency should be seen as temporal and social. Therefore, attitudes (or long-term intent) may be inferred based on a pattern of behavior that points to the preservation of certain options. In Scott's narrative, choices about where to live determined one's future options for assimilating into, or avoiding, the state. Ethnic identities,

such as Ngöbe vs. Latino were then socially constructed over these geographic distinctions. It may be that ethnic identities will not be redrawn along geographic lines in the future, but decisions about where and how we live may form the basis for other kinds of constructed identities.

In social science more generally this also holds true. While the deliberations of individuals are not observable, their actions are. For example, people decide whether to live close to their work or close to their families; to live near public transportation or in a suburb; or to live in an ethnically homogeneous or ethnically diverse neighborhood. Not all of these decisions are specifically political, but as the state behaves differently in different places, decisions about where to live include calculations about our preferred relationship to the state. Thus, our choices about where we live can also say something about our political disposition. In addition, where we settle geographically is just one of many choices that we make on a daily basis. While the interpretive analysis of historical records is useful for cases such as the Ngöbe, other interpretive methods focus on the minutia of contemporary life.

As Ellen Pader argues, there is an “integral relationship between everyday, seemingly mundane activities, such as where and with whom one sleeps, and larger social policies and belief systems.”³⁰ To the extent that that connection is posited to be intentional, researchers must make some assumptions about the role of agency in their explanations. Of course many such situations may not be at all intentional. Living in an area without libraries may not be a choice, but may have consequences for literacy levels. In other cases, however, when people choose a given set of circumstances, it is worth attending to how those choices impact and/or

³⁰ Pader, “Seeing With an Ethnographic Sensibility,” 161.

reflect their view of the world.

Participant observation, in particular, allows researchers to access a vast trove of information. The power of this method comes in part from its simplicity. Participant observers rely on the seemingly mundane artifacts and actions of daily life that are so obvious and taken-for-granted that no one would think to conceal them. "What are considered empirical research data to some are simply the trivia of everyday life to others."³¹ However, because these are facets of daily life that are mundane from the standpoint of those being observed, it is difficult to say what conscious thoughts or decisions are associated with these artifacts and actions. As Pader points out, these are "such mundane acts that we might not be explicitly aware of the multitude of thought processes that go into getting around every day."³²

The problem that arises here is similar to the problem with Scott's assumption that behaviors and spaces chosen to avoid the state eventually become the basis of ethnic identity. In that case, the stronger the assumption that patterns of behavior became linked with identity, the weaker the claim that they were the product of a straightforward expression of agency. Similarly, we gain something from observing that a behavior is so mundane that no one could be bothered to conceal it. Namely, we gain some confidence that the presence of the observer itself is not distorting the observations. At that same time, however, the claim that the thoughts and decisions associated with an observation are largely implicit, seems to undermine the possibility of attributing a sense of agency to the actions in question. Socially constructed identities of any kind then might behave like ethnic identities in that their

³¹ Ibid., 164.

³² Ibid.

adoption may not signal a specific posture towards a specific actor, such as the state. For example, a person might identify as a cyclist or a sports-car driver, without reflecting directly on what this says about her relationship to the state.

I believe that thinking of agency in the sense argued above (a socially and temporally constrained choice that focuses on future options) helps to resolve this apparent conflict. Implicit choices are still choices. It may be that when faced with two options, one will be habitual, familiar, and perhaps linked to a sense of identity. The other may be strange and unknown. Under these conditions it might be that people choose the option they know best most of the time, particularly if it is connected with their sense of identity. Such a decision could be described in terms of fear or ignorance. However, I argue that it makes more sense to think about it in terms of future options. For example, when faced with the prospect of getting a driver's license, someone who has never driven a car might opt instead to buy a bus pass. Similarly, someone who has always driven a car might rent an undesirable apartment farther from the city center because of the availability of parking. One might say that the former is ignorant of the many advantages of driving, and that the latter is ignorant of the benefits of urban living. But this could be framed differently, and I argue more sensibly, as behavior directed at preserving known future options. The person with the bus pass envisions all the familiar routes that have allowed her to navigate the city successfully in the past and perhaps the goods that can be purchased with the money that would be spent on a car. The driver thinks of the convenience of getting around quickly and the freedom to make her own schedule. Both likely frame the decision in terms of preserving future options.

These options, in the case above, have clear implications for one's relationship with the

state. The public-transit rider will depend on future investments in public transportation to keep fares down and to keep the routes she depends on in operation. The motorist will depend on public investment in road maintenance, snow removal, and the provision of parking spaces to preserve her future options. Both are implicitly choosing a future relationship with the state that requires continual renewal when they choose a place to live and the future options that accompany it.

Conclusion

Scott does not make a compelling case that upland peoples embraced a well thought out and coherent anarchist ideology. However, this was never really his goal. Instead, he makes the case, as I read it, that hill peoples sought to avoid entanglements with the state whenever possible. In doing so, I argue that they sought to maximize their future options. They were not likely to embrace an explicitly anarchist worldview, but they did become *de facto* anarchists.

In the same way, I argue, many mundane, unremarkable actions in peoples lives will say something about the options that people value and the implications of those options. The modern citizen who embraces the identity of a bike or subway commuter may not actively argue for environmentalism. The former may be after exercise and the latter may prize reading time. But both become *de facto* environmentalists and establish a relationship with the state that will likely result in future advocacy for policies that will decrease the resources allocated to cars and increase the options for bikes and public transport.

The Art was criticized for painting the lives of mountain people with too broad a brush.

In one sense, this is a fair criticism as *The Art* is at times polemical. At the same time, social scientists should not abandon the idea that agency can be seen in historical records or mundane facts of daily life. Such agency may not be demonstrable in recorded deliberations and may not even be explicitly recognized by the study subjects at the moment of action. It is, however, inherent in the choice of some options and the rejection of others. In many cases, particularly when people choose a place to live, such choices can meaningfully be interpreted as an expression of their preferred relationship with the state. These data, and the interpretive methods used to explore them, are therefore important to our understanding of politics and should not be discounted by appeal to too narrow a definition of agency.