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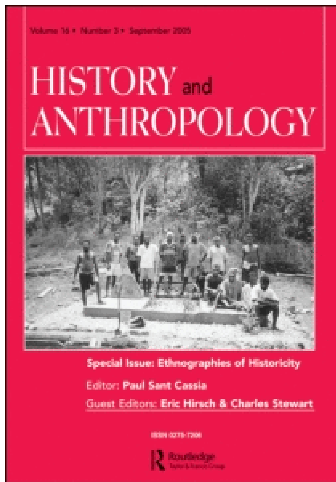

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Above and Beyond: *Zomia* and the Ethnographic Challenge of/for Regional History

Hjorleifur Jonsson

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James Scott's notion of Zomia *proposes a new look at historical and social dynamics in a vast area of the Asian hinterlands, in terms of deliberate state-avoidance that came to an end through the nation state's superior techniques of control.* Zomia *is a concept metaphor that defines the social reality it purportedly only describes. My examination points to a pervasive problem with the historicization of highland regions in Europe as much as in Asia. Juxtaposing Scott's case with two other definitions of* Zomia, *I call attention to the way concept metaphors define social landscapes and historical dynamics. Drawing on the work of several Europeanists, I suggest a model of rural–urban relations that does not privilege either a community or the state as the principle of society and history, which may overcome the separate disciplinary biases of anthropology, history and political science.*

Keywords: Southeast Asia; History; State-Minority Relations; Marginality; Zomia

Introduction

In his new book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott (2009) offers a bold proposal for a historical resignification of a vast Asian hinterland area in terms of state-avoidance. His case is both specifically about Southeast Asia and generally about non-state spaces and peoples; gypsies, Cossacks, Marsh-Arabs, San Bushmen, and various other state-fringe populations feature in his account. The argument Scott makes is an important challenge to the separate biases of political science, history and anthropology, and his book may suggest interdisciplinary perspectives on regions that are somewhat anomalous in conventional disciplinary practice. Ethnographers and other

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anthropologists generally lack the regional and historical focus that Scott displays, while historians tend to work in fields that have more of an archive and political scientists concentrate on structures and institutions that are more akin to those found in western state-societies and social theory.

The term *Zomia* has considerable potential for generating cross-disciplinary dialogue about the landscapes and the character of history. At the same time, the term may inherently shape the historical and social imagination in particular directions. The term is both a promise and potentially a problem. As a concept-metaphor, the term may invent the reality that it supposedly only describes. Concept metaphors, such as gender or the French Revolution, "facilitate comparison, frame contexts, levels or domains within which data—however defined—can be compared for similarities and differences" (Moore 2004: 75–76). If there is a general agreement on the defining features of a concept metaphor, it serves as paradigmatic to a particular approach on reality, in Kuhn's terms. Thomas Kuhn makes it clear that the facts of science are made by paradigms and theory, which in each case inform or change "the knowledge-mediated relationship between [scholars and their research topic]" (Kuhn 1970: 25, 141).

"The economic, political, and cultural organization of [the peoples of *Zomia*] is, in large part, a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures" (J. C. Scott 2009: 39). Scott (2009: 20) cites Braudel on "an unbridgeable cultural gap between plains and mountains" in the Mediterranean region, and notes that historians of Southeast Asia have made similar assertions. He alludes to complex histories of interactions across the assumed divides of hill and plains, but argues that hill peoples "represent, in the *longue durée,* a reactive and purposeful statelessness of peoples who have adapted to a world of states while remaining outside their firm grasp" (2009: 337); that is, *Zomia* is a "non-state" space, characterized by zones of refuge and by "escape-" forms of agriculture and social life. Furthermore, it is currently being erased, by the powers of incorporation that the nation state has over its precursors (2009: 23, 127, 187, 324–325).

This imagery rests on an implicit contrast between a powerful and oppressive state and the margins of escape, refuge and avoidance. It is not a given that the hinterlands are in fact non-state spaces, or that they are zones of refuge or of "escape" forms of culture, agriculture and social life. This is simply an assertion, and is open for examination in terms of ethnographic or historical detail, and in relation to the dynamics of analytical constructs. To some extent, *Zomia* points to what earlier forms of knowledge referred to as a tribal zone, so it inherently calls for a position on what used to be called tribal peoples. In Scott's study, the notions of "resistance, refusal, and refuge" go together in a recharacterization of previously tribal peoples and places (2009: 125–219; 2008: 12–13). Scott and some other scholars point to the work of Fernand Braudel as an inspiration for regional historical visions, but this is inherently problematic because of a particular implicit notion of historical dynamics as somehow absent from highland areas. Braudel suggested the primacy of ecological and political economic factors in shaping social formations and history more generally. His characterization of a "highland world" in the Mediterranean region is worth quoting at some length:

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> There can be no doubt that the lowland, urban civilization penetrated to the highland world very imperfectly and at a very slow rate. This was as true of other things as it was of Christianity. The feudal system as a political, economic, and social system, and as an instrument of justice failed to catch in its toils most of the mountain regions and those it did reach it only partially influenced. The resistance of the Corsican and Sardinian mountains to lowland influence has often been noted and further evidence could be found in Lunigiana … This observation could be confirmed anywhere where the population is so inadequate, thinly distributed, and widely dispersed as to prevent the establishment of the state, dominant languages, and important civilizations. (Braudel 1972: 38)

Elsewhere Braudel states:

> In no society have all regions and all parts of the population developed equally. Underdevelopment is common in mountain areas or patches of poverty off the beaten track of modern communications—genuinely primitive societies, true "cultures" in the midst of a civilization. (Braudel 1993: 17–18)

While to the historian these may have been true cultures, the mountain communities of southern Europe represented something else to their lowland neighbours: "The lowland peasant had nothing but sarcasm for the rude fellow from the highlands, and marriages between their families were rare" (Braudel 1972: 46).

Historian K. N. Chaudhuri applied the Braudelian structural perspective to Asia "before Europe". His rendering of the highland peoples engaged in shifting cultivation is worth noting, for the way it projects history's flows:

> The system of shifting cultivation was essentially a common response of man to a particular environment. Under the system of shifting tillage, the density of population must have remained very low. A situation of chronic underpopulation and an abundance of forest land justified the survival of swidden culture through the centuries. (Chaudhuri 1990: 220)

In other words, Chaudhuri projects a historically static setting where no forces seem to be at work, and where a persistent lack of (population-) pressure is coupled with the abundance of basic (re-) productive resources; land. This formulation resembles that of Plato's *Laws*, where the few and isolated mountain peoples, in their "[naïve simplicity,] weren't compelled by poverty to differ with one another" (Pangle 1980: 61).

Anthony Reid's (1988; 1993) study of Southeast Asia on the eve of the colonial era is much indebted to Braudel's perspective. The work only mentions highland peoples in passing, suggesting that they are marginal to the historical dynamics of the region. Victor Lieberman's (2003) study of mainland Southeast Asia in comparison with Europe in the historical era (800–1830 CE) makes a few passing references to Southeast Asia's "hill peoples": "Between Shan valleys the mountain tracts inhabited by illiterate Chins, Kachins, Karens, Palaungs and so forth escaped Burman political control entirely by virtue of their poverty, inaccessibility, and the fragility of their supra-village organizations." In some cases, upland chiefs drew on lowland political and social models "to construct proto-statelets and to magnify internal stratification" (Lieberman 2003: 208–209).

It is a common notion in Southeast Asian scholarship that the highland regions only became integrated with the lowlands in the era of the modern nation state. Prior to that, states were not concerned with borders, and; "the tribal people wandering in the

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mountain forests were subjects of no power" (Winichakul 1994: 73–74). This and similar notions reinforce an academic near-consensus on the nation state as territorial in ways that its precursors were not.

I highlight the commonality among these studies because together they systemically misrepresent the regional dimension to social divisions by assuming certain urban and state-biases. History pertains to the lowlands, to rulers, peasants and traders. Winichakul is not concerned with that history but with a critical study of the role of mapping in the consolidation of the modern nation state, but as he depicts the growing tentacles of nation-state control against a historical backdrop, he reproduces the familiar imagery of highland people's fundamental separation from the region's dynamics of society and history.

These works have expanded our understanding of the historical evolution of the Mediterranean, Asia, Southeast Asia, Thailand, and sometimes their many interconnections, but they all rest on, and reproduce, ignorance about the highlands that bypasses various questions on their historical and regional reality. Can there be knowledge about the highlands' people and places that is regional or global, be it historical or contemporary, and is not cause for ethnographic embarrassment? That is the promise, or at least the potential, of *Zomia*.

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Three notions of *Zomia*

According to Scott,

> *Zo* is a relational term meaning "remote" and hence carries a connotation of living in the hills; *Mi* means "people". As is the case elsewhere in Southeast Asia, *Mi-zo* or *Zo-mi* designated a remote hill people while at the same time the ethnic label applies to a geographical niche. (J. C. Scott 2009: 14–16)

Scott points to the work of Willem van Schendel as the inspiration for the notion of *Zomia*. Van Schendel (2002) argued for an increased focus on border areas, the places and dynamics that are systemically missed by certain normative analytical perspectives of area studies, and for a retooling of geographic attentions in terms of new concepts and an attention to flows. The aim was "to break out of the chrysalis of the area dispensation which occurred after World War 2, and to develop new concepts of regional space" (2002: 665). Area studies have conspired to produce selective kinds of ignorance. In particular, van Schendel suggests that vast areas of the Asian hinterlands tend to be invisible in scholarship. The rather arbitrary division into world areas accentuated the problem. He gave the example of "four settlements in the eastern Himalayas, each some 50 km from the other. Arbitrary decisions made in studies and conference-rooms have allocated them to four different world areas [East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia]", whose scholars often do not communicate across these divides and may not pay much attention to these border zones (2002: 653).

The process of making a field of study involves the fashioning of a terminology. Van Schendel proposed the term *Zomia* as a way to challenge some of the biases of area studies. "This is derived from *zomi*, a term for highlander in a number of Chin-Mizo-Kuki

languages spoken in Burma, India, and Bangladesh." Importantly, he evokes Braudel's areal scope as both an inspiration and a challenge:

> If seas can inspire scholars to construct Braudelian regional worlds, why not the world's largest mountain ranges? Excellent studies of various parts of *Zomia* continued to be done, but these did not address an audience of fellow "*Zomia*nists", nor did they have the ambition to build up a *Zomia* perspective that could offer new sets of questions and methodologies to the social sciences. (2002: 653–654)

Any historical study depends on categorizations of place, time, identity and history that are already there—in social life and sometimes in the archives. This points to various issues of epistemology and theory, such as how we know that highland peoples stood outside the state, whether there is a clear divide between state- and non-state spaces, and if our understanding and treatment of Zo corresponds to the highlanders' view of themselves as a people and of the highlands as a place. At issue is whether a definition of the highlands as *Zomia* serves to reify a particular, contingent perspective and produce new kinds of area ignorance.

As van Schendel suggested, the construction of an area-knowledge runs the risk of creating its own unthinkables. *Zomia* as a field of study is open to various reifications. Social history, historical ethnography and related disciplines such as geography can complement one another in this field. Such scholarship needs to pay attention to highland–lowland intersections and how places and people are signified from various perspectives. A one-dimensional sense of the highland area will only replicate previous analytical problems of regional history making.

In Scott's work, the analytical and descriptive appeal of the term *Zomia* is as an uplander term for the upland region; that is, it promises to eschew the state-bias towards the natural, social and historical landscape that casts hinterland populations as anything from deficient to savage to off-the-map in the forested wilderness. However, the matter is not that simple. The term comes from Chin peoples, some of whom call themselves Zo. According to Lehman's (1963) ethnography of the Chin, the indigenous term *zo* "means, roughly, 'unsophisticated' [in contrast to *vai*, that] connotes a positive [valuation] of Burman civilization. *Vai* stands for civilization—the place from which a greater quality and diversity of things are to be had" (1963: 3, 30). This indicates not a positive self-valuation of a people, but a relational term of relative lack or poverty compared to lowland state-society, for instance their less-productive fields. The term also appears as a referent to the coarse, general-purpose blankets that could be sold to anyone, as opposed to high-quality blankets that could be used for marriage payments and other high-level exchanges that assumed important social relationships among the Chin (1963: 54, 165).

Given the understanding that Lehman conveys, *Zomia* is perhaps not a particularly auspicious terminology, but van Schendel was not concerned with the highlands from a highland point of view. Rather, he took issue with the general tendency of the arealization of scholarship that artificially produced divides between areas that are contiguous and interconnected in numerous ways. This version of *Zomia*—*Zomia*^{1}, to distinguish it from the Zo notion in Lehman's study (*Zomia*^{0}) and James Scott's

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subsequent proposal (*Zomia*^{2}, hereafter Z^2)—encapsulates what may be contradictory notions. One is of the highlands seen from the highlands, which is problematic because it draws a negative image relative to lowland state societies. Another is the critique of divides in area studies that preclude certain kinds of knowledge from either being created or shared. To considerable extent, area scholars are confined to one side of the border(s) and not interested in hinterland regions.

Like any scientific term, *Zomia* defines and may even create the phenomenon that it supposedly only describes. The tension between creating new area-knowledge (what "fellow *Zomia*nists" might do) and challenging the conventions of area studies is left fundamentally unresolved. Van Schendel has not followed up his critical observation with a more comprehensive exposition of *Zomia* as a useful analytical construct, although he has continued to work on borderlands and unofficial traffic (van Schendel 2005; van Schendel and Abraham 2005). By contrast, James Scott is much more explicit about what story the term might tell; "a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures" (2009: 39).

There are various precursors to Scott's depiction of highland areas as zones of state-avoidance. Anthropologist Reo Fortune, who did research among Yao in southern China for two months in 1938, generalized about highland farmers in terms of their marginalization:

> No rice growers live voluntarily in the hills, where the poor land has to be terraced and irrigated foot by foot. In earlier history the present day highlanders were decisively conquered and driven into their present positions … by the southward expansion of the Han, the Chinese proper. They gave ground, of necessity, but they gave little else, neither recognition, obedience, compliance nor willingness to pay taxes, or to receive education or medicine. They kept their own national spirit and they paid for it in some disadvantages. (Fortune 1939: 343–344)

A similar sense of marginalization by the Chinese state is prominent in Wiens' (1954) account of China's southward expansion. The notion of the state pushing various minority populations to geographical margins was common in the colonial era. In the accounts of colonial-era explorers from the northern parts of mainland Southeast Asia, there is a rather frequent reference to the changing fortunes of different 'races' over time. One example comes from explorer Holt Hallett:

> The Kha [peoples] are doubtless the aborigines of [the northern regions of Thailand and Laos]. They are supposed to have been ousted from the plains and driven into the hills by hoardes of Laos, an eastern branch of the Shans, migrating from [northern Vietnam] when it was conquered by the Chinese about B.C. 110. (Hallett 1890: 21)

Colonials naturalized their presence through references to the long run of regional history as being about the uneven power of different races. This colonial inscription of history simultaneously wiped out any trace of the social and historical ruptures involved in the racial structurings of colonial encounters and routines. Structure, in this sense, makes history/myth and thereby memory (Sahlins 1981, 1985; Trouillot 1995).

Any construction of identity may involve a similar dynamic of erasing its own contingency. Rather than joining the effort to expose and critique self-serving colonial

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significations of the Other, I suggest that this opens the issue of *Zomia* to new questions. What Lehman describes as the Chin/Zo view, encapsulated in the various references of the term *zo*, may not describe an ethnic or a highlander view. Lehman cites linguistic research on the idea that the Burman word for Zo peoples, Chin, was derived from a term meaning "ally or comrade" (1963: 3). This definition appeared in a Burmese dictionary, and in the 1950s at least one Chin politician protested in the Burmese Parliament that this was nationalist propaganda (Vumson 1986: 4).

It is not a fact that Chin/Zo are allies of the Burmans. Rather, the term avails potentially rival proposals for particular kinds of relations across social divides at specific historical moments. The politician's protest was voiced at a time when the position of Chin and many others in relation to the modern Burmese nation state was both ethnicized and problematized (Lehman 1967; Smith 1991). The same ambiguity appears in the Malay term "sakai", that was in the past often taken as synonymous with "slave". At different historical moments, this term also referred to "subjects", "dependents" and "allies". It later became an ethnic label for some hinterland populations; peoples who in recent times are known as Orang Asli, "original peoples" (Couillard 1984; Porath 2002). These various understandings have always been central to the definition of what is a Malay, an issue that has never been clear or settled (Nagata 1974; Benjamin 2002; Mandal 2003). Identity is, and was, a term of engagement, with the state's agents as much as within—and between—various groups. In and beyond academia it is sometimes taken to refer to a thing-like entity, similar to how Marx (1976: 163–175) described the mysterious nature of commodities that appear to be "things" but are in reality much more complex and precipitate relations among people.

"Sakai" does not necessarily mean an ally, a slave or a specific ethnic group, but it has had any one of those references in particular settings and from particular perspectives. It is potentially quite specific to time and place who and what the Chin can be, and how Chin peoples can relate to Burman society and other dimensions of their social universe—such encounters lend a certain shape to the Chin as they situate them in relation to others. The encounters of ethnographers are equally specific to their context. The averages assumed in such compilations as *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (LeBar *et al*. 1964) are a particular kind of fiction. As such works offer a view of a region through an assembly of its peoples, they deny the historical and other contextual specificity of knowledge and of identity, both that of analysts and the various peoples that the knowledge concerns.

Zomia^0 may not even have had a collective, universally subscribed semantic significance. As such, the term points to the analytical risks of assuming that "hill tribe" peoples are a collectivity that stands somehow out of time and circumstance. All ethnographic encounters are particular, and it may certainly be possible to focus on local detail and refuse to take a regional or historical view because of this specificity. An alternative is to draw on necessarily particular and partial views and argue ethnographically and historically against the tendency of area studies and ethnographic comparisons to reduce large groups of people to types that are characterized by a single worldview.

Z^2 promises a big-picture view of a vast region. It up-ends the received view about remoteness by questioning the state's self-serving truths. People are not in remote

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places because they are removed from the glories and "benefits" of civilization and the dynamics of history, but rather, because the state was often oppressive and some managed to escape its clutches. In this way, Z^2 suggests that the landscape tells a different and unofficial story. The notion can be productive of new knowledge to a certain extent, but it also risks reproducing old assumptions about the state as powerful and oppressive and the hill peoples as marginalized and collectively faced with outside pressures.

Both Z^0 (Lehman) and Z^2 (Scott) assume that highland peoples are a collectivity and that they share a view of themselves in relation to the lowlands. Z^1 (van Schendel) is quite different in its focus on a range of state and non-state actors, cross-border trade, multi-ethnic assemblies of peoples, and the inter-digitation of warfare, trade, food, languages, newspapers, smuggling and so on; that is, it notices and highlights the transgressive, the unexpected, the common things and odd juxtapositions that are often overlooked and will not become information or facts given the expectations of area studies knowledge. Z^1 has all the liveliness and indeterminacy of actual fieldwork encounters while Z^0 and Z^2 appear free of such messiness. Z^0 has the ethnographic particularity and depth that the others lack; it for instance brings out various diversity and gradations in what counts as Chin and how Chin relate to other peoples, highland and lowland. Each of the *Zomia*s leaves questions with the received view of the people, places and social dynamics of the vast Asian hinterlands. They complement one another in scope, specificity, historical particulars, complexity and new ways to question the tendency to reduce people and places to averages or types. Together, the three *Zomia*s also leave doubts concerning the highlands and their peoples as an entity and about the firmness of the upland–lowland divide.

I wish here to interweave these concepts to explore how one can move further in the characterization of social realities. My inspiration comes from Herzfeld's reaction to the project of "Mediterranean anthropology" that has invited problems similar to those of regional histories: "We must use ethnography, not as a servant of anthropological theory, but as the source for a critique of anthropological practice—of what theory *does*" (Herzfeld 1987: 6, emphasis in original). As a concept metaphor, *Zomia* promises to bring unexpected light on a multiply neglected region, its peoples and dynamics. How the concept relates to characterizations of history, identity, social dynamics and the state is not about the concept itself but how scholars and others may use it. There is no agreement on the French Revolution as a historical phenomenon, but there seems to be no doubt about its importance, judging from "two hundred years of scholarship and controversy" (Furet and Ozouf 1989: xiii). Why Paris, and not *Zomia*, has been so significant expresses an important problem that links and divides history, geography, anthropology, and other fields.

Of Places, Peoples and Times

Braudel's analytical framework and Chaudhuri's subsequent application of it to Asia are not neutral analytical constructs, but formulations that owe much to a meta-theoretical view of the flow of history and the forces (religious, political and economic)

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of civilization. Their classifications of people, places, history and temporality present as discovery what has already been signified in ways that indicate an urban, modernist bias. Their work assumes the remoteness of mountains and mountain-communities, and they plot history in terms of forces emanating from cities and through trade, in ways that reinforce the spatial imagery. In other words, they take Euclidian geometry as axiomatic, and set it in motion in terms of states and civilization.

In anthropology, there was for decades a reluctance to engage with regional or global histories. Eric Wolf (1982) challenged this ahistoricity of anthropology's "peoples", but the manner of his challenge is also notable. He wielded a Marxian sense of economic relations as the structuring principle of society, which led him to a tripartite distinction among kin-based, tributary and capitalist production regimes. The characterization was anchored to a global historical trajectory; "the world to which capitalism has given rise [where for instance] the Mundurucú and the Meo were drawn into the larger system to suffer its impact and become its agents". Contemporary ethnicities, he argued, are "not 'primordial' social relationships. They are historical products of labour market segmentation under the capitalist mode" (Wolf 1983: 23, 281).

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Wolf never explicitly declared the historical inertia of peoples not affected by global capitalist expansion, because he could not imagine the existence of such peoples. Over the last five hundred years, all the various supposedly isolated and traditional peoples of ethnographic fascination have not only suffered from the impact of capitalist expansion but they have also become agents of furthering its process. It is a particular theory of history that enables Wolf to assemble a range of materials to illustrate his big-picture view of capitalism's peoples; in Kuhn's (1970: 141) terms, the theory lends sense to the "data" as it inspires its collection.

Reo Fortune's generalization about mountain farmers drew on a range of sources. It was mediated by multiple Chinese interlocutors and the long Chinese history of signifying highland peoples. Also, a few years before Fortune's research, Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalist policies inspired the police to cut off the long braids of Yao women and to order the demolishing of Yao village temples: "Anyone who resisted would be arrested, but only after being paraded through town" (Litzinger 2000: 155). What Fortune characterized as their "national spirit" was not some timeless Yao trait but rather, an ethnic consciousness that was triggered by deliberate policies of repression at a historically particular moment.

This can be compared to one ethnographer's characterization of northern Thailand's Mong (Green Hmong):

> At the core of the culture is the idea that Mong have been oppressed and exploited over many generations by the Chinese. The visualization of space itself places the Mong in a small community of people who cooperate among themselves, but who are surrounded by the overwhelming power of the state. (Radley 1986: 78)

Radley conducted his research in northern Thailand at a time when Mong peoples were vilified as a communist threat to the nation, when many of their settlements had come under attack; some were bombed, and many people were forcibly resettled.

The ethnic label allows for a characterization of history in terms of oppositional identification that assumes historical transcendence. The Mong have always been oppressed, and the Thai are just another manifestation of what "the Chinese" were—an outside oppressor. The characterization is not wrong in any simple sense; it is highly accurate for a time, place and people; but the jump, through the ethnographic encounter, from these particular observations and stories to a historically transcendent relationship of inequality and oppression involving the state and an ethnic group is analytically and descriptively suspect.

To historicize *Zomia*'s peoples and places, it may not be particularly revealing to add *Zomia*ns to history as it has been figured, where remoteness and marginalization appear factual. It is worth attempting something along the lines that Joan W. Scott and other scholars of gender have proposed; to rethink the way history, science and ethnography are done (J. W. Scott 1988; Haraway 1991; Tsing 1993). If history tends to assume Euclidian geometry and an urban bias concerning the forces and flows of history, it is imperative to rethink the assumptions that sustain this particular production of knowledge.

Julio Caro Baroja, a historian, anthropologist and linguist, analysed various permutations of the rural–urban binary in the Mediterranean region (1963, 1992). The model plotted peoples as social types on the landscape in ways that fused time and space. Ancient and simple peoples were up high, and modern and complex peoples down low. Caro Baroja argued that neither the temporal divide or directionality nor the supposed cultural difference between country and city were historically valid; cities and the countryside were coeval. He suggested that instead of chasing after ideal images of social types in two separate places, it would be more rewarding to study the countryside and the cities in terms of relations and continuities (1963: 40). The common notion of city life manifesting a breakdown of traditions and traditional social forms is not historically valid. It misrepresents and oversimplifies city life as much as the countryside. Furthermore, the image implies a critique of the "vices" and modernity of urbanites that ignores the often vocal and organized urban lower class, the plebs (1963: 32–35).

An upper-class projection of particular values on the rural and mountain peoples expressed a debate in urban areas that was anchored to notions of virtue and heritage, against less well-established urbanites. It stands in direct contrast to another common urban view of peasants and mountain folk as ignorant hicks, hillbillies, fools, and so on (Caro Baroja 1963: 39–40; Braudel 1972: 46; Hsiung 1997: 103–105; Winichakul 2000). Such discursive formations reify particular configurations of social types and temporality. These representations do not appear to express social consensus. Rather, they bear all the marks of an ongoing debate in Mediterranean societies and elsewhere, among different social factions in (primarily) urban areas whose contestations for prominence evoked various characterizations of hinterland and highland peoples. Such notions and contestations established particular configurations of space and time as history as they naturalized it by mapping it on identity—peoples as types that were identified with urban areas, the countryside, a nation, race and the like.

Remoteness is a particular time–space–identity configuration that assumes an urban view. It is an ideological configuration and not a fact. Asia and a mountain village seem

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remote only if one is invested in the centrality of Europe or another such perspective whose reality and contingency are entirely out of view as one writes about an-Other area; its peoples, places and dynamics. Adam Kuper has argued that western scientific ideas about "primitive society" were ideological notions that allowed for debate about its opposite, "modern society—[such concerns as social reform,] the state, citizenship, [and] the family" (1988: 239–241). Something similar can be seen in the endless production of scholarship about the French Revolution, most of which has insisted on the inertia and irrationality of the peasantry (Revel 1989: 77–80).

Regional histories of the Mediterranean and Asia bring certain phenomena into view, through which historians can situate themselves and contribute to debates about economy, civilization, state power and the specificity of the modern state. Kuper explains the success of the idea of primitive society with reference to how the notion implied matters of immediate social concern. The notion also "generated a specialized tradition of puzzle-solving" and "yielded to an endless succession of transformations which could accommodate any special interest" (1988: 241).

Scott's *Zomia* formulation assumes that the state is of a particular kind, somewhat like the despotic state that has some history as a notion in Southeast Asian studies. There are alternatives, that emphasize the state's exemplary status among its subjects and play up the consensual and benevolent aspects of statecraft (Christie 1986). It is more rewarding not to assume the state as a coherent and unified project any more than one should take an ethnic group or highlanders for granted as uniform entities. Instead, the state is produced through relations of various kinds, and it is invoked as justification for oppression, extraction, greatness, identity and war, while in fact its representation may have more to do with intra-elite rivalries and ways of claiming rightful power and agency.

States claim historical transcendence, as do ethnic groups and many other subjects, but that is an assertion and not an achievement. There can be a range of relations between state agents, communities and domestic groups, through supra-village intermediaries such as ethnic leaders, and village- and commune headmen. Davydd Greenwood (1973; 1978) proposes a model of the relations among communities, regions and state governments that can engender conflicts as much as collaboration at various levels or points of interaction. This seems a better analytical tool than the apparent choice between the state as cosmological and consensual, or as blunt and oppressive.

For the historical landscape of the Southeast Asian hinterlands, such a model needs to address complexity; rival communities competed for relations and benefits, and certain upland leaders did benefit significantly from the marginalization or oppression of various other highland peoples. In my understanding of the social landscape of Southeast Asia, the highlands are different in degree rather than kind from the lowlands. Greenwood's model charts historically the relative autonomy of communities in the context of what are now called "socionatures"—particular relations among states, capital, society and nature (Nevins and Peluso 2008)—and suggests that it is only in the era of the nation state that communities become fully integrated with the state and may not be able to support themselves without various links to state

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structures (Greenwood 1973: 33–44). This is a useful model for thinking about *Zomia*, and it can be extended to include the pre-modern and modern state's project of creating and managing diversity in terms of rank and ethnic categories, which are variations on one another for establishing particular kinds of relations and inequalities (Jonsson 2005: 43).

Apparent Incommensurables

The historical record makes it clear that there was a civilizational divide between state societies and hinterland communities in East, South and Southeast Asia. Civility and state control were mapped on an area conceived and reproduced in terms of cleared land, that became a coherent social project through the representation of an opposite: the forested wilderness (Jonsson 2005: 29). It does not follow that the so-called forested wilderness constituted a non-state space, or that highlanders necessarily viewed themselves as consistently inferior to lowland state society as the Zo roots of *Zomia* indicate. Rather, states ideologically denied any intimacy with peoples considered unfit for their projects of glory and extraction.

The Z^2 (Scott) notion of non-state spaces is questionable, in so far as various ethnic labels on the state's fringes have been terms of engagement with the state. When the Yao became an ethnic group in relation to the Chinese state, they were so expressly as a people who must live in the forested wilderness and did not owe the state obeisance or taxes (Cushman 1970; Jonsson 2005: 26–32). However, as far back as the records reach, this insistence on a fundamental incommensurability coexisted with various interactions and relationships. States did not preclude the difference represented by ethnic others in the forested mountains, but they insisted on managing this difference in ways that reinforced relations of inequality and a particular hierarchy of command.

The rhetoric of incommensurability may have been particularly relevant in intra-elite conflicts, where one ruler could de-legitimize another with reference to improper dealings with outside groups. To my knowledge the historical record does not have much material of this sort, but many entries in Chinese annals and gazetteers detail military suppression of peoples such as the Yao, as well as the extension of "civilization" through intervention in ritual practice and the establishment of schools (Cushman 1970, 1: 31, 215; Alberts 2006: 23–47). Both dynamics are about particular individuals acting to restore or extend order and proper hierarchy, and as such they are about legitimating individual government officials, while it is unclear if the justification concerned rivalry for the same honour within the government. The repeated insistence on separation suggests the opposite of a firm boundary, and in fact the separation went together with relations of taxation and trade (Jonsson 2005: 21–22).

The insistence on separation aligned particular and distinct projects of morality and identity on divided space and served to categorically deny any transgressions (Harrison 2006). As such, the upland–lowland divide is likely to have served a range of upland and lowland agendas once this distinction was in place and people could fashion themselves and their others by rhetorically denying the possibility of a much more complex and interconnected social life. The point is not to declare the highlands

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a 'state-space' in some general terms, but to suggest that the spatial binary on the state/non-state axis is most likely overdrawn and a reflection of ideological priorities more than that of social relations. The upland–lowland divide is fundamentally ambiguous. In many ways it facilitated the relations that it categorically denied. Any assertion of identity is a political project, but its politics may be quite complex. In the shifting networks of relations that connected individual leaders in particular settlements to agents of taxation, trade, service-duties and the control over identity, status and diversity, and to the burden of various other settlements, the highlands may in fact have much in common, historically, with the lowland areas that were supposedly "within" the state (Jonsson 2005: 32–35).

The upland–lowland divide serves to make such ambiguities unthinkable. I view this as an ideological project that denies the complexity of history and society, as well as the ambiguity of social identities and divisions in a multiethnic and multiply ranked social setting. Island Southeast Asia (what is now Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines) shows many of the same features of diversity and divisions as does the Mainland (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). Terms like *Batak* (Sumarta), *Dayak* (Borneo) and *Toraja* (Sulawesi) implied upriver or hinterland populations, but are now ethnic labels. The modern nation state turns them into ethnic groups and minorities, but the connections of these peoples who are categorized in this way to larger landscapes are a historical problem. In one part of Sulawesi, separate clusters of upland and coastal communities sometimes "act[ed] in concert [against armed Bugis incursions, but at other times] looked upon one another with suspicion. Above all, these polities were consumed with their own internal rivalries and power struggles [before they collapsed in 1872]" (George 1991: 548). One historian of Sumatra "found a situation where two coastal rulers each commanded distinct lines of loyalty with different sections of the Batak population" (Drakard 1990: 46).

These examples counter expectations of a fundamental divide between highland and lowland peoples, and point instead to intra-elite rivalries in the lowlands, and competition among settlements and leader-candidates in the highlands, that came together in various ways in particular settings (Tsing 1993: 72–120). This is not to deny various differences between social and cultural formations in relation to shifting cultivation and wet-rice farming, respectively, but it is, rather, to insist that this social landscape does not spell out a firm and lasting binary in relation to the state.

The upland–lowland divide generally worked to the advantage of chiefs in highland societies, who in many cases had state-derived titles. Such relations generally assumed ethnic labels, such as Yao, Lawa and Kha, where the identity category was a term of engagement with the state. In these relations, a local elite could sustain its status by mediating interactions with lowland powers. Importantly, these were not relations where an ethnic group somehow "had" a leader, but particular relationships that created as much as they reflected various inequalities in highland areas. One settlement might derive considerable wealth from such relations, at the cost of others who supplied labour, rice, metal and the like. Scott's *Art of Not Being Governed* discusses such complexity and interrelations, but not to the extent of questioning the axiomatic

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statelessness of *Zomia*ns which supposedly is being undone by the contemporary nation state.

To the extent that Z^2 charts history, one where the modern nation state is reaching where its precursors did not, it creates a distinction between pre-modern and modern (colonial and nation-) states that should be treated with scepticism similar to what I have suggested for the upland–lowland divide. There is considerable continuity regarding uneven relations among states, traders and various highland peoples. These continuities and inequalities counter expectations about the unity or uniformity of highland populations. This complexity and specificity of places, peoples and times calls for a rethinking of the state as well as of the periodization of modern, colonial and pre-modern states.

Historian Joan W. Scott argues that when scholars assume "that women have inherent characteristics and objective identities consistently and predictably different from men's, and that these generate definably female needs and interests, [they] imply that sexual difference is a natural rather than a social phenomenon" (1988: 4). Assuming the highlanders' fundamental difference from lowland society in Asia runs a similar risk, one that is simultaneously analytical, descriptive and political. Joan Scott's study of labour statistics in nineteenth-century France insists on situating documents in their

> discursive context and read[ing them] not as a reflection of some external reality but as an integral part of that reality, as a contribution to the definition or elaboration of meaning, to the creation of social relationships, economic institutions, and political structures. (1988: 137–138)

I suggest a similar approach to the many available statements about upland–lowland differences and divides across this region. Each of the three *Zomia*s offers certain perspectives and definitions toward such a project.

Modernity and different state formations are concept metaphors, they are not things. Any concept metaphor brings certain things into view, that then can be taken against experience—in social life as much as in the archives—and both tested and contested. Ethnographic fieldwork exposes its practitioners to various challenges to established knowledge, and to how one bridges the particularity of individual encounters or events and frameworks of common knowledge through which the specific and the general can be made to illuminate one another.

The potential of fieldwork to deliver descriptive and analytical surprises distinguishes it from other research methods (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 19). One time in 1996 when I arrived with an interpreter-assistant in a village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, a group of older men got very enthusiastic. They hoped that the tall, white person was a Frenchman who was coming to reestablish French control and would rid them of what they considered to be an unpopular Vietnamese regime. If one had to generalize selectively from such singular encounters, one could come to the (erroneous) conclusion that highlanders desired a return to colonial rule. By visiting a number of places and asking about histories, access to land and the varying fortunes of particular groups, I came to a different sense of these highlands that has many parallels in the history of highland areas elsewhere in the region. They are cross-cut by shifting

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allegiances where one lowland regime replaces another and changes its hinterland favourites. The result is that individual settlements have perceived and experienced their fortunes as linked to a particular set of officials.

In this particular area, different settlements had been favoured by the French, then the South Vietnamese government and their American allies, and yet others by the subsequent (post-1975) Vietnamese government. In each case, the favourites of previous rulers had been relegated to marginal farming areas and the new rulers' allies settled in the best locations. Extracting a general point from this example, I find not a highlander (*Zomia*n) view of the state but rather, competition among highland settlements that plays to a succession of lowland authorities. James Scott's notion of *Zomia* as concerning resistance and state-evasion draws selectively on examples that do not suggest such dynamics of uneven incorporation. Nor was it a desire for evasion but for a selective and favourable incorporation.

Any such fieldwork encounter can unsettle the 'normal science' (Kuhn 1970: 23–34) quality of regional history or ethnography that assumes power emanating from "the state" (Scott) or "the economy" (Wolf) and engulfing merely local communities in far-off places (for a radical alternative, see Tsing 2005). One Mediterranean parallel is that of Pyreneean villagers who had a long history of various conflicts among themselves and played a greater role in creating national boundaries than did the French and Spanish state-powers that they invoked for this purpose. Further; "the differences introduced by the boundary [between France and Spain] created new reasons to cross it" (P. Sahlins 1998: 52, see also P. Sahlins 1989). Another scholar of this region insists on qualifying these findings as they do not appear to account for dynamics in the Basque areas of the same mountain range. He suggests that the region's multivocality, among Spanish, French, and Basque languages, is matched by multilocality, with no particular resolution to 'overlapping, yet competing, views on the physical (and social) landscape' (Douglass 1998: 90). Both examples suggest ways to historicize and otherwise qualify Braudel's sense of mountain people's collective and lasting disconnection from, and resistance to, lowland states in the Mediterranean region.

The Mediterranean region does not explain Asian examples, but my juxtaposition suggests ways of transgressing area-studies boundaries for the purpose of making highland areas speak to states, ethnicity and the making of history in both senses of the term. History implies particular structures of difference, inequality, and relations as well as knowledge that establish tracks for understanding the present and its peoples. The highlands are productive of historically relevant knowledge and of ways to examine specific configurations of time, space and identity. This is not because the highlands are distinct but precisely because they have always been implicated in lowland societies and in the production of regional history. What is clear is that the highland areas have never written history. As a consequence, it is easy to find support in the historical record for either the marginality of the hinterlands or for the persistent emphasis on the desire to incorporate recalcitrant highlanders into state structures. These are not neutral historical facts but reflections of state projects that variously insist on the state's centrality or on its projects for expansion.

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My ethno-historical research on the Mien peoples in Thailand and Laos has partly concerned the shifting role of highland leaders on the fringes of tributary-, colonial- and nation states (Jonsson 2001; 2005; 2008; 2010). This material counters simplistic portrayals of the highlands as spaces of evasion and resistance, or of a shared perspective on the state, and there are various parallels from other hinterland areas of this region (Renard 1979; Baird 2008). During intermittent research between 1990 and 2009, I have asked various Mien people about history, farming and about prominent Mien leaders of the past. The replies vary, while there is unexpected similarity in how they vary in two different settings—a peaceful setting of a trade monopoly and later nation-state integration in northern Thailand versus that of trade monopoly, colonial taxation and then war in northern Laos, followed by exile.

Some remarks convey great, unifying leaders who had complete control and represent the greatness of the ethnic group; others are more ambivalent and sometimes dismissive, suggesting that their power is overstated; and yet others suggest that these leaders were overbearing and used their power to arbitrarily punish, physically or otherwise, anyone they did not like (Jonsson 2001: 642; 2008). Such remarks are important for a sense of Southeast Asia highlander views on power—the assessment of previous leaders depends on individual people's location (village, mountain range and so on) and relations with these leaders in specific conditions of farming, trade, state control and warfare. These views can also be taken as an indication of power more generally; it is only in actual situations that it acquires meaning and substance. Depending on how particular people, settlements and regions relate to individuals and structures of power, they may suffer, benefit or stand somewhere in-between and be rather indifferent. Characterizations of the state and its power as benign and ceremonial (Geertz 1980) or as blunt and oppressive (see Christie 1986) appear, in this comparative light, to be highly selective readings of the historical or ethnographic record. Without context and ethnographic support, such generalizations about power and the state are about as convincing as pronouncements about ethnic culture that do not refer to any actual people or particular situations.

The Mien leaders that I have learned about had titles and position derived from dealings with the state, and it is very clear that both in the past and at present, various *Zomia*ns, highland people in highland settlements, have to some extent embodied the state. While these leaders had formal titles from kingdoms such as Nan (in northern Thailand), Muang Sing (in northern Laos) and Muang La (Yunnan, southern China), there is no record of their existence, unlike that of lowland persons of rank and power. Archival research will not reveal such relationships between highland peoples and lowland states; only a combination of ethnography and theory can tease out such historical realities that have no official recognition.

Analytical attention to relations among communities, regions and governments over time may suggest continuities that undermine the common sense that the nation state spells the end of certain kinds of history and politics (Greenwood 1978; Jonsson 2010). James Scott's notion of *Zomia* defines not only certain social dynamics and cultural priorities in the hinterlands, it also assumes that modern states bring hinterland peoples "to heel" in ways that their historical precursors could not (2009: 4). This

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imagery accommodates and reifies particular state-centric classifications of hinterland peoples as wild or tame depending on their relative incorporation and legibility within the state. Seen in this light, Z^2 as a concept metaphor is anchored to the state as a principle of historical and social signification, even when the analytical emphasis is on hinterland people's ways of avoiding or repelling the state. Scott suggests that his analysis "makes little sense for the period following the Second World War" because modern nation states have "engulfed" all their fringe areas (2009: xii).

This sense of a historical shift, from evasion to incorporation, may discourage contemporary research on Asian hinterland populations in history or in the present. Most recent research on that region's hinterland peoples, in anthropology and related fields, has focused on the dynamics of marginalization and state incorporation (Harrell 1995; Laungaramsri 2003; Buadaeng 2004; Duncan 2004; McCaskill *et al.* 2008; Bourdier 2009). While this has been a welcome shift from the now-expired focus on ethnically defined cultures and social structures, there is a curious affinity between the two projects. Scott's notion of people brought to heel by the modern state, and the various studies of marginalization, evoke an opposite, lost condition of freedom and autonomy (cf. Clifford 1986 on "ethnographic allegory"). This appears isomorphic with the romantic orientation of tribal ethnography, particularly regarding the ambivalence about modernity and the state; that is, while any of these recent studies is clearly distinguished from its ethnographic precursors, they all appear to continue the binary moral valuation of spatial difference (the country and the city) as temporal contrast (tradition and modernity) through social typologies (Caro Baroja 1963).

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Conclusions

My examination of Scott's notion of *Zomia* points to certain enduring problems with the historicization of areas beyond the state's active reach, both the assumed inertia and isolation of the highlands common in the work of Braudel and his followers and the lack of historical documentation beyond the official reality of the state. I also pointed to two alternative versions of *Zomia*, one from an ethnography and another from a recent re-signification of Asia's hinterland areas from a geographical perspective. The three are to some extent at odds but they complement one another in ways that merit further exploration against the historical and ethnographic records. *Zomia* is not a "natural region", nor a "region of nature". Instead, any such definition serves as a concept metaphor that highlights certain issues and downplays others. My study of the case for *Zomia* suggests considerable problems with the notion of state-evasion-as-freedom and that of the modern state as spelling the end of certain kinds of history and social dynamics. Alternative analytical perspectives that focus on the interplay of rural and urban areas and on patterns in relations among communities, regions and states emphasize different dynamics and carry a different potential for revealing historical continuities and shifts.

A choice among such perspectives has important implications for the definition of the concept metaphors that make any study legible and interesting beyond the academic realms of certain area expertise, from where any analysis can be refined and

debated for what it describes and leaves out. Scott cites Braudel on an unbridgeable cultural gap between the plains and the mountains, with the implication that this makes the Mediterranean analogous to Southeast Asia, and highland peoples somehow analogous wherever they are found. I suggest that this is a very selective reading of the social landscape that rests on a particularly urban bias that is anchored to an axiom of Euclidian geometry about the remoteness of the mountains.

There are ways to up-end the state's hegemonic definitions of hinterland peoples other than Scott's strategy of inverting it, such as by starting in the highlands and examining how they connect to larger regions. The cases made by van Schendel and Lehman differ significantly, from one another as well as from Scott's case, in what people characterize *Zomia* and what social dynamics they display. These differences highlight the important role of analytical perspective and concept metaphors in defining the social landscape and the dynamics of history. While Scott explicitly sidesteps any primordial notion of highlander identities and emphasizes that "all identities are constructed" (2009: xii–xiii), he only relates this issue to ethnic and national categories; he does not entertain the possibility that the state is as historically contingent or as much a selective representation as are ethnicities or nations.

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Scott's notion of the state is as axiomatic to his project as was the notion of Chin society to Lehman's ethnography. Van Schendel's focus on that which falls between the cracks of disciplinary- and area-studies expertise (the state, the (hinterland) ethnic group) stands as a necessary corrective to the separate axioms of the other *Zomia*s. His emphasis on (illicit) flows rather than on (official) structures contains its own biases toward borderlands and informal traffic. As such, his model is not aimed at the historicization of regions but away from the structures that make such flows analytically or descriptively unthinkable or trivial. Attempts to historicize regions are important, both for a perspective on the nation state and as an analytical framework within which communities can be made to speak to more general issues.

For all their separate emphases, the works of Julio Caro Baroja, Davydd Greenwood, Peter Sahlins and William Douglass on Spain and its borderlands have much to offer about the relations among states, regions and communities in particular locales and comparatively over time, in Asia and elsewhere. None of them takes either the community or the state for granted as an analytical principle; as the driving force of social relations or historical dynamics. Rather, each of them suggests that it is through their interactions that states and communities lend shapes to regions and to history and to the dynamics of identity. This is as much a conclusion as an analytical starting point, and can be related to such concepts as "the structure of the conjuncture" (M. Sahlins 1985), "middle ground" (White 1991), "contact zones" (Pratt 1992; Clifford 1997), and "friction" (Tsing 2005).

Concept metaphors such as *Zomia* not only define the relevant historical and social dynamics, they also determine what peoples come into view as characteristic of a place and time. Chin society (Z^0), borderlands and illicit traffic (Z^1), and state control (Z^2) mediate, in their separate ways, the relationship between scholars and their research topic. If *Zomia* is to gain ground as an angle on history and society in comparative perspective, its descriptive credibility and analytical productivity will most probably

draw on a juxtaposition of the three definitions, but as an allegorical notion regarding the landscapes of history, Scott's *Zomia* is not simply about some Asian hinterlands. It is equally about ideas through which his audience understands identity, freedom, social control and historical transformations; the iconic realm of social imaginaries.

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