



HAL
open science

Internalized Zomias? James Scott's theory and the world's sparsely populated areas

François-Michel Le Tourneau

► **To cite this version:**

François-Michel Le Tourneau. Internalized Zomias? James Scott's theory and the world's sparsely populated areas. *Terrain : revue d'ethnologie de l'Europe*, 2023, pp.24826. 10.4000/terrain.24826 . hal-04192032

HAL Id: hal-04192032

<https://hal.science/hal-04192032>

Submitted on 31 Aug 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Internalized Zomias?

James Scott's theory and the world's sparsely populated areas

François-Michel Le Tourneau



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/terrain/24826>

DOI: 10.4000/terrain.24826

ISSN: 1777-5450

Publisher

Association Terrain

Brought to you by Campus Condorcet



Electronic reference

François-Michel Le Tourneau, "Internalized Zomias? ", *Terrain* [Online], Lectures et débats, Online since 12 June 2023, connection on 31 August 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/terrain/24826> ;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.24826>

This text was automatically generated on 25 June 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Internalized Zomias?

James Scott's theory and the world's sparsely populated areas

François-Michel Le Tourneau

- 1 In an essay about “area studies,” Willem van Schendel (2002) gave the name “Zomia” to a mountainous region located at the fringes of Himalayan and Southeast Asia, which could have become a distinct cultural area but failed to be recognized as such because scholars were polarized by other “dominant” cultures which overshadowed its cultural significance. The concept of Zomia was then reworked by James Scott in 2009, from a self-declared anarchist perspective. In this work, Scott aims to demonstrate that Zomia's peoples (an important plural) were not remnants of “uncivilized tribes” who survived on the fringes of different empires, but peoples who had deliberately chosen to flee the domination of central states and chose for this reason to inhabit remote or difficult-to-access areas, which were out of reach of centralized governments.
- 2 Scott's theories are contentious. As summarized by Hamond (2011), Michaud (2010, 2017) or Magnusson (2021), some scholars point out overgeneralizations and ideological biases. For them, in his all-out attempt to make Zomia and its peoples an anarchist endeavor across several centuries, Scott does not avoid the pitfalls of an oversimplification of Southeast Asia's history, and he bases his conclusions on a slim (to their eyes) empirical basis.
- 3 The purpose of the present paper, however, is not to discuss yet again the arguments for or against Scott's thesis, but rather to examine whether some elements of it can be applied to wider regions across the world. Although principally focused on what happens within Zomia's (elusive) borders, Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed* has laid some basis for such generalization. The first chapters, especially, trace the main lines of the argumentation using a number of heterogeneous examples of other “state-evading peoples,” from Marsh Arabs to Cossacks and from South America's Indigenous peoples to European mountain populations. A common point of most of these examples, crucial to Scott's argument, is that the peoples in question used some features of their environment as a shield against empires, and that in most cases this was made possible because these regions were sparsely populated.

- 4 This “friction of terrain” as a deterrent to states’ reach has been considered as one of the main conceptual advances of Scott’s book. But, according to him, road construction and other “distance-demolishing” technologies led Zomia to its demise after the 1950s. With these new factors, the rule of dominant societies could now reach their most peripheral parts, and nation-states finally succeeded in incorporating the small bubbles of autonomy that subsisted on their fringes.
- 5 What I want to explore here is the possibility that they didn’t disappear altogether, but that, as my title says, numerous Zomias (using this name as a concept) existing across the world were internalized within nation-states, maintaining various degrees of autonomy. In doing so, I will make connection with another line of thinking about the persistence and the specificity of sparsely populated areas (Le Tourneau 2020), considering that their scarce population, and challenging terrain, still severely limit the control that states can exert despite technological advances.
- 6 To do so, I first summarize Scott’s theory of escape from central state governance, trying to underline its principal factors. I will then explain how sparsely populated areas are still an important feature of the contemporary world, and how they share some of the characteristics attributed to Zomia by Scott. In a third section, I will try to see if an analysis of sparsely populated areas considered as “internalized Zomias” can be sustained. Finally, in a fourth part, I will pay closer attention to the concept of the “friction of terrain,” in order to see if it can be complemented by another concept, which I name “friction of capital.”

Zomia and James Scott’s theory of escape from central state governance

- 7 The name “Zomia” was coined in 2002 by Willem van Schendel to refer to a large region spanning from the Northern periphery of the Himalayas to Southeast Asia, mostly composed of high-elevation terrain, sometimes named “High-mountain Asia,” or “Haute Asie.” In this challenging terrain, a number of small societies and cultures persisted despite the efforts of the plains’ kingdoms and empires to expand and rule them. The Hmong and Karen, among many others, would be examples of such “state-evading peoples.”
- 8 In his 2009 essay, James Scott offers a reinterpretation of the history of such populations. Reversing the common narrative sustained by empires, his theory is that they are not “backward tribes” who failed to join the path of progress because of the constraints of their punishing environment. They are peoples who chose to settle in this specific environment precisely because it would make it extremely difficult for centralized governments to reach them. What were they trying to escape from? Scott replies: “taxes, corvée labor, conscription, and the more than occasional epidemics and crop failures associated with population concentration and monocropping” (2009: 23).
- 9 Inspired by Pierre Clastres’ theories about Amerindian societies having chosen to give up permanent agriculture for a semi-nomadic lifestyle in order to escape colonial conquest, the author of *The Art of Not Being Governed* goes even further, considering that many of the peoples inhabiting Zomia have set up mechanisms to prevent the emergence of state-like structures within themselves, for instance deciding to tactically

“forget” writing as an instrument inevitably leading to the emergence of a dominant class.

Their subsistence routines, their social organization, their physical dispersal, and many elements of their culture, far from being the archaic traits of a people left behind, are purposefully crafted both to thwart incorporation into nearby states and to minimize the likelihood that statelike concentrations of power will arise among them. State evasion and state prevention permeate their practices and, often, their ideology as well. [. . .] They are “barbarians by design.” (2009: 8)

Common property and use of natural resources were among the mechanisms designed to maintain egalitarian societies based on networks of small villages.

- 10 A crucial point of Scott’s argument is the idea that difficult environments are chosen as refuges by societies fleeing the oppression of central states. As he shows, this idea was initially applied to South America by the Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1979) and it also appears in Ernest Gellner’s (1969) work on the Maghreb or Michaud’s work (2006) on Asia. Helped by terrain, the societies wishing to escape the grip of centralized agrarian states would also rely on specific crops (cassava, tarot, etc.) and agricultural techniques which would make them less vulnerable, and on acephalous “jellyfish” political structures not easily destroyed by a single blow when attacked.
- 11 As Scott underlines, this “no-handles” strategy was not a refusal of any contact with state societies, but a refusal of submission. Peripheral societies would eagerly engage in trade with empires, providing them with natural resources they could gather in their environment and eventually playing the role of “martial minorities” while being employed as mercenaries for the benefit of dominant powers.
- 12 In Scott’s view, Zomia’s peoples are “a state effect,” or the “inescapable ‘dark twin’ of state-making projects” (2009: 326). What nation-states call “barbarians” are thus not uncivilized people but political units that refuse to forgo their own autonomous political organization. Hence, “barbarians can be, and often have been, quite ‘civilized’ in the sense of literacy, technological skills, and familiarity with nearby ‘great traditions’ – say, of the Romans or the Han-Chinese” (2009: 123-124). However, states generally frame the areas these different peoples live in as dangerous and uncivilized – for fear, following the anarchistic view of Scott’s work, that their more egalitarian system could constitute “an ever-present temptation to those who might wish to evade the state” (2009: 31).
- 13 As a radical and provocative thesis, Scott’s work has received expected criticism. Some have refuted the concept of Zomia altogether, deeming it “a metaphor that, in effect, invents a reality rather than describes it” (Jonsson 2010: 192). Others have pointed out specific weak points in the way Scott recalls the history of the peoples and empires described in his work (e.g. the fact that “hill people,” in their escape from empires, did not themselves found their own states). Finally, some critics have hinted that Scott’s vision of accessibility as necessarily antithetical to cultural and political autonomy might be far too systematic. Gohain (2019), for instance, reverses Scott’s argument. In her view, the action of the state can also create voluntary places of isolation, applying differentiated policies to people whom it deems different (either pristine or unruly), to the point of giving them only “selected access.” Rather than a consequence of the environment, she argues, remoteness is, then, a construct of governments that isolate populations and societies which have historically always been connected to a wide network of other peoples.

Sparsely populated areas as an enduring feature of the contemporary world

- 14 Given the focus accorded to population growth across the world, it might be surprising for some that sparsely populated areas are still a dominant feature in today's world. Data about the distribution of the world population (figure 1 and table 1) clearly indicate that areas with a population density of less than 1/km² still account for more than 59% of emerged lands, with records in Australia (87%) or North America (86%). They are thus not rapidly shrinking territories but, on the contrary, still comprise a large portion of the world (including developed and temperate areas). Some areas are well known, like the Arctic North, the Amazon, Siberia, Australia's interior, the Sahara, the US mountain West, etc. Others are less recorded as such or have seen population losses that recently made them sparsely populated, such as mountain areas in Britain, Spain or Portugal. And if sparsely populated areas are commonly considered as inhospitable, the fact is that none of them has ever been devoid of human presence since the Holocene (hence their designation as sparsely populated and not unpopulated). Inuits in the North, Tuaregs in the Sahara, Tibetans in the Himalaya or Indians in the rainforest, or contemporary ski resorts and sprawling cities in the desert, have long shown that there are very few areas on earth that cannot be occupied as long as human populations are willing either to adapt to them or to pour in enough resources to make it possible.
- 15 Special characteristics associated with sparsely populated areas have led some authors to set them out as a special field of study. In 1981, Lonsdale and Holmes designated them as "sparselands" and demonstrated, by studying Australia and the United States, that they were not just found in the Global South (where they were often studied under the paradigm of the "frontier") but continued to be an ever-present facet of the contemporary Global North also. Sparsely populated areas are considered to be different in nature from the traditional rural world because of their supposedly hostile environment, whereas rurality is equated with favorable human settlements. They also differ because they rely more on extractive or extensive activities than on agriculture, and human presence and the transformation of the natural landscape by human activities is discontinuous or only discernible with difficulty (although not totally absent, the "wilderness" of sparsely populated areas being much more a cultural construct than a tangible reality). Mostly, they do not form a "country" or a "farmland," and are more often referred to as "wildlands."

Continent	Density < 1/km ²		Density > 1/km ² and < 5 / km ²		Density > 5 / km ²	
		%		%		%
North America	86	%	5	%	9	%
South America	59	%	23	%	18	%
Africa	36	%	17	%	46	%
Australia	87	%	6	%	7	%

Europe	35	%	25	%	41	%
Asia	54	%	14	%	32	%
World	59	%	14	%	27	%

Table 1: Share of the continents in terms of demographical density

source of data: WorldPop 2020

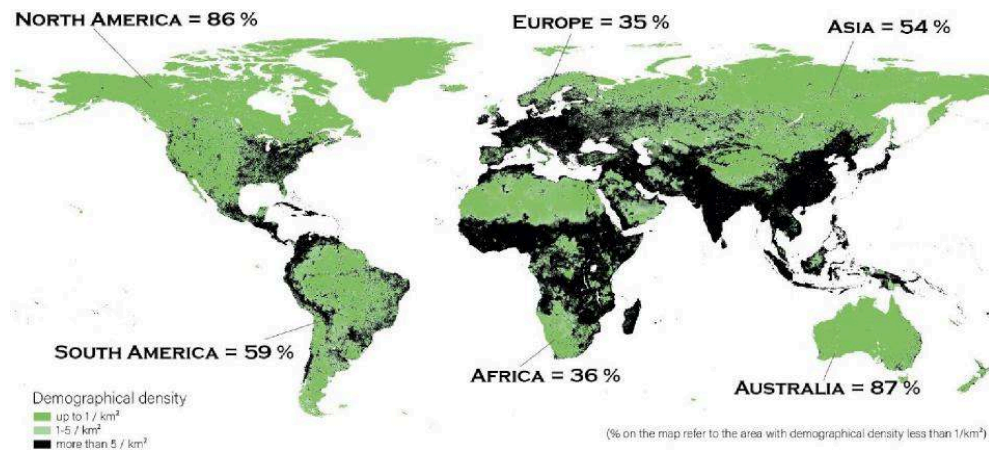


Figure 1: Sparsely populated areas across the world

source dataset: WorldPop 2020

- 16 These basic characteristics of sparsely populated areas resonate strongly with what Scott has written about the encounters between state and non-state peoples. If non-state is the “raw,” the “wild” and the “uncivilized,” it seems that they fit the profile exactly. Moreover, in many countries, words used to refer to them convey the same mixture of danger, orientalism, accusations of backwardness and assimilation to wilderness that Scott describes for Zomia: the “outback” or “the bush” in Australia, “backcountry” in the US, “bled” in former French colonial areas, “sertão” in Brazil, etc. (Le Tourneau 2020).
- 17 Trying to sum up how sparsely populated areas differ from other regions of the world, and looking at Australia and the European Nordic countries, Carson and Carson (2014) have proposed the “8D” framework which confirmed their distinctiveness and pointed out eight core characteristics (Distant, Disconnected, Discontinuous, Diverse, Detailed, Dynamic, Dependent, Delicate). Building on this, my recently published paper (Le Tourneau 2020) narrowed the distinctive features to four:
- *Sparse population*: sparsely populated areas are regions where space is abundant and humans are rare, which translates into isolation for those inhabiting them.
 - *Remoteness*: even if the definition of remoteness is a relative concept that is very place- and culture-dependent (Bocco 2016), sparsely populated areas are not easily accessed, which implies that services in general are deficient. Contrary to what one would expect, remoteness is probably increasing in relative terms today because even if accessibility or connectivity improves, it does so at a slower pace than in better-served areas, which results in a widening gap between the two (Carson & Carson 2010; Magnusson 2021).

- *Incomplete control*: control by central governments as well as by local populations is put in check by distance and/or rugged terrain, a point that echoes what Scott called the “friction of terrain,” which I will return to. Sparsely populated areas are therefore frequently affected by informal (or unregulated) and/or illegal activities such as smuggling, poaching, informal exploration of natural resources, etc. This incomplete government control is another important difference with rural areas.
 - *Presence of Otherness and distinct lifestyle*: sparsely populated areas are often places where Indigenous groups are able to maintain a meaningful presence and control over important territories. This echoes the “bewildering cultural complexity” referred to by Scott when he defines “shattered areas.” The Brazilian Amazon, for instance, is still home for more than 200 Indigenous peoples speaking more than 150 different languages, while in Siberia more than 45 languages are spoken. But the complexity is also increased by population movements to sparsely populated areas. Historically, some groups have found refuge in them, like many Maroon communities in South America, or Indigenous peoples migrating from areas invaded by colonists. More recently, social groups persecuted for social or political reasons also sometimes chose sparsely populated areas as safe heavens.
- 18 Hence, if it is the case that the world is witnessing an accelerated loss of minority cultures and languages, many of them nevertheless do still survive, and, not by coincidence, mostly in sparsely populated areas.
- 19 This then leads to the question as to whether all these surviving peoples fit Scott’s theory and whether each can be considered as a “Zomia.” The extent to which this concept can be generalized outside the Asian continent is a point of open discussion. Scott himself seems to encourage it by stating that if “the precise shape of the encounters is, to be sure, unique to each case,” there is a “ubiquity” of “the encounter between self-governing and state-governed peoples – variously styled as the raw and the cooked, the wild and the tamed, the hill/forest people and the valley/cleared-land people, upstream and downstream, the barbarian and the civilized, the backward and the modern, the free and the bound, the people without history and the people with history” (2009: 3).

Are contemporary sparsely populated areas “internalized Zomias”?

- 20 If sparsely populated areas seem to share many aspects of Scott’s theory, they are not independent from nation-states. So, is it legitimate to label them as “Zomias”?
- 21 In the first place, the use of the name “Zomia” for the designation of sparsely populated areas can be justified. Obviously, the name is memorable, which makes its use tempting. As Michaud (2017) writes: “Zomia, like Shangri-la or Xanadu, is a catchy name and makes for a wonderfully enticing sound bite. It may well stick with media and academic publishers, who have a penchant for the scent of mystery it carries” (2017: 200). But there are more serious reasons for using it. Reviewing its etymology, Scott indicates “Zo is a relational term meaning ‘remote’ and hence carries the 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” (2009: 14). Hence, Zomia seems quite a good alternative to the signification of both the technical expression of “sparsely

populated areas” and “population living in sparsely populated areas” (along with the pejorative qualifications that similar vocabulary implies, as we saw earlier).

- 22 Secondly, it is true that Scott considers that Zomia ceased to exist after the 1950s because of technological “distance-demolishing” advances. Therefore, applying this concept to contemporary regions would be theoretically impossible. However, according to Hammond (2011), Scott himself was considering as a possibility the fact that the conditions that had sustained the independence of Zomia for such a long time continued to exist in some parts of the world, despite his depiction of the contemporary world as an “era in which virtually the entire globe is ‘administered space’ and the periphery is not much more than a folkloric remnant” (2009: 324). Others, like Anne Cluan¹ (Magnusson 2021), consider that setting up this temporal cut-off might have been a tactical choice for Scott, allowing him to avoid engaging with what happened after the formal incorporation of formerly independent spaces within nation-states and the forms of resistance or autonomy which still subsist but are often carried out by quite unromantic actors such as drug lords, terrorist groups or even modern corporations. As Rippa points out: “If, the argument goes, we understand Scott’s Zomia as a way of being, rather than merely a political situation, then corporate players and drug lords are as much escape artists as the Wa or the Naga” (2019: 263-264).
- 23 Hence, it is possible that Zomia-like spaces still survive today, located within the boundaries of states, but nonetheless maintaining some spheres of autonomy by using the strategy of not making themselves visible as obvious opponents to sovereignty. Many examples can be cited. In the Amazon as well as in the US West or in Alaska or the great North, for instance, hundreds of Indigenous peoples maintain part of their traditional social and territorial organizations under special territorial and political statuses they were able to negotiate (albeit not easily) or claim from dominant societies. They did, it is true, have to forgo the total independence they enjoyed before, and it is also clear that the coexistence with the state is neither easy nor stable (see, e.g., the position of Indigenous peoples in today’s Brazil). However, most of those territories would largely fit the definition of Zomia as relatively detached from the mainland and culturally self-sufficient. Such examples can also be found to diverse degrees in Northern Europe, in Siberia, etc. The strategy of choosing a remote territory so as to be away from the state’s attention and maintain (overtly or discreetly) distinct customs or social norms can also apply in modern cases. One can, for instance, think about the Mormons in the United States, who chose to settle in Utah to avoid persecution and be free to enforce their own social and religious norms. They subsequently accepted forgoing some of them, like polygamy, in order to be awarded statehood, but many observers note that as the interior of Utah was a really remote region, no one could really ensure the extent to which the new rules were really enforced. In other words, the formal incorporation of lands within one state’s boundaries does not necessarily imply this state has total control of them. And, as we have underscored, incomplete government control is inherent in sparsely populated areas.
- 24 In line with this, some authors have used the concept of Zomia to analyze territories looking for greater autonomy. Rippa (2019) shows that the Golden Triangle between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand can be approached as one such enclave. This area showcases that the type of relationships that peripheral societies or spaces were able to

negotiate with empires in the past (e.g. as providers of hard-to-find resources, left alone in part because of this role) still exist today because centralized states can have an interest in letting otherwise prohibited activities, like gambling, happen in supposedly “unruled” territories on their margins. Very interestingly, Ripa cites an interview with the Chinese businessman Zhao Wei about why he invested in the Golden Triangle, in which he used the exact same clichés that we mentioned as the exterior definition both of Zomia and of sparsely populated areas: “He describes it as *poor* (pingkun) and *backward* (luohou), but also *beautiful* (meili) and *untouched* (yuansheng). [. . .] ‘Everybody can feel that there is something *mysterious* (shenmi), *terrifying* (kongbu), *evil* (xie’e) about this place” (2019: 261, my italics).

- 25 Considering that corporations can be stakeholders in the resistance against states opens interesting avenues for inquiry which would not completely be outside Scott’s theory since he himself asserts that tribal identities in Zomia could sometimes work also as “trade unions” when negotiating with central states: for instance, when a given minority was able to gain the monopoly of the trade of a given resource. Moreover, according to Scott, states may move in the shadows and have a role in creating tribes as they need interlocutors to negotiate with when trying to organize their fringes. In the same way, in this Zomia 2.0, “it is precisely through the ambiguous presence of the state that these spaces manage to maintain a unique level of autonomy” (Rippa 2019: 266). Notwithstanding the ethnic or cultural question, one could even question whether large areas placed under the “delegated management” of NGOs for the purpose of environmental conservation, especially in Africa, wouldn’t fall into the same category.
- 26 Magnusson (2021) also worked on a concept close to “internalized Zomias.” Describing Baltistan, a remote and strategically sensitive Pakistani province on the border with India, he shows that even if local minorities have bowed to the state’s rule and are relatively closely monitored, at least in principle, they still retain areas of autonomy and even spaces of contestation by using the exact same information and communication technology (ICT) that is used to control them. He also criticizes the vision of distance-demolishing technologies as only serving the state’s purpose, pointing out that minorities can also find a certain empowerment by connecting to a wider world, which thus turns out to be a “double-edged sword”: “ICT puts the periphery online with the rest of the world and thus lets its inhabitants move into a new, transnational terrain with its own friction, thereby letting people who choose to do so take refuge in virtual places out of the state’s reach” (2021: 68). Such observations, and his argument that “ICT actually increases inequality to make offline communities even more peripheral” (2021: 67), are quite apposite in the Amazon, for instance, where better internet- and media-connected Indigenous peoples (like the Kayapo) can achieve a better power balance with the state (and thus stay, paradoxically, more apart) than lesser connected ones.
- 27 It is thus possible to justify the claim that if Scott divides the world between state and nonstate areas and concludes as to the disappearance of most nonstate spaces, these spaces can subsist under an “internalized” form as long as they do not frontally oppose the state’s sovereignty (a fact that, on the contrary, would be sure to unleash a strong punitive reaction). Blending in within a state could even be a new strategy for many formerly independent peoples, superficial allegiance being at times a better guarantee for preserving some parts of their autonomy than overt resistance. As a matter of fact, empires have often used such devices to stabilize their peripheries. They could, for

instance, create “marches” under the guidance of a leader or a warlord, theoretically expanding their control over turbulent areas but, in reality, leaving it up to the local leader to deal with things how they wanted as long as they would not frontally oppose the center or change alliances. Thus, states do not always colonize and culturally change the areas they conquer using “internal colonialism,” and when they do so, they are not always able to fulfill their project because of the “friction of terrain.”

From the friction of terrain to the friction of capital?

- 28 Central to Scott’s argument about state evasion is the concept of “friction of terrain.” According to him, the state’s ability to coerce (by waging war or sending police forces or tax collectors) is constrained by the capacity of its agents to travel through the areas they target. When the terrain is easy, domination can be projected quickly and easily. When the terrain is more difficult, things get tougher: “As Braudel and Paul Wheatley noted in general, political control sweeps readily across a flat terrain. Once it confronts the friction of distance, abrupt changes in altitude, ruggedness of terrain, and the political obstacle of population dispersion and mixed cultivation, it runs out of political breath” (Scott 2009: 44-45). This friction of terrain, offered mainly by high mountains but which can also be found in large marshes, dense jungles, areas prone to frequent natural disasters, etc., creates refuge areas for the populations who want to evade the state. In this view, roads and rivers are the paths of least friction and the best avenue for states to project their domination.
- 29 The friction of terrain, however, is no longer a determining factor today, according to Scott, because of the invention of “distance-demolishing technologies” such as all-weather roads, helicopters, modern telecommunications, etc. Therefore, he claims, his analysis does not work after the 1950s. The fact is that the current relationship with distance seems very different from what it has been for centuries. Every point of the earth is virtually observable and reachable by the state’s agents (the police, the military, tax administrations, etc.) within a few hours or days at most.
- 30 Yet did the friction of terrain disappear altogether in this new landscape? I don’t think so. Technologies make most areas accessible, but at a cost which increases exponentially with the distance from the closest well-connected center and with the duration of the endeavor. Hence if states can theoretically exert total sovereignty over every part of their territory, they will frequently choose not to because of the disproportionate cost of doing so in relation to the potential returns. An interesting example along these lines would be the US-Mexico border. First, one can notice that the United States has long been reluctant to invest resources into it, despite the fact that illegal immigration was common after the Second World War. The threat was thus not considered serious enough to require the investment of a significant flow of resources, even if successive waves of measures progressively consolidated what was a “soft border” into a much harder one. Second, despite enormous efforts by the Obama and then Trump administrations, this area is not completely controlled, as acknowledged even by signs posted across it (figure 2). Many observers even question if such a thing would make sense; they consider the construction of a “big, beautiful wall” across the most difficult environmental stretches of the border to be a waste of precious resources. In their eyes, instead of trying to defend a line in the middle of nowhere, it is better to patrol roads coming from those areas, which migrants will have to take at

some point to get to their destination. In sum, it is easier to take the effort to control out of sparsely populated areas, where it is almost impossible, in order to exert it in areas closer to the cities, where the exertion of power is easier. Such limits of technological control of difficult areas were also proven time and again in Afghanistan, where the Mujahidin and then the Taliban could hold out against two superpowers in great part because of the nature of the terrain.



Figure 2: States can sometimes even directly acknowledge their incomplete control of sparsely populated areas...

Photo : taken in Southeastern Arizona, FMLT, 2019

- 31 Contemporary states may therefore, despite advances in technology, not be much more capable than their past counterparts in relative terms. Like them, they can mount punitive expeditions or strike dissident forces when they gather, but long-term occupation remains mostly beyond their reach. Modern soldiers or police forces will have difficulty in accepting being deployed for more than a few months or years, nor will they move their family to occupy abhorrent areas. Furthermore, the cost of high-tech equipment and of its maintenance means that its use is frequently reserved for extreme cases.
- 32 Thus, if the friction of terrain can be erased by technology, another friction emerges, which is the overall cost of such operations, which I call the friction of capital. Technology exists to build roads, but it is not feasible to build them anywhere, nor is it possible to land a helicopter at every point every day. The question of illegal gold mining in French Guiana is a clear example of such limits. Even having an important technological, police and military power at its disposal, the French government has not succeeded until now in rooting out Brazilian gold miners operating under the canopy of the rainforest because the territory to be controlled is very large and the amount of resources that is needed for full control exceeds what is currently available to the

government, or at least what it thinks it can justify in relation to other pressing priorities. This opens an interstice in which a small self-governed society (the Brazilian *garimpeiros*) successfully holds out (Le Tourneau 2021) – a little Zomia.

- 33 In this balance between costs and benefits, modern sparsely populated areas connect with old areas of refuge. In effect, as Scott indicates, with reference to Aguirre Beltrán (1979), such areas were, in the case of the Americas at least, left alone because they were “of no economic interest to the Spanish and posed no military threat” (2009: 131). As tribes could make themselves “unattractive as objects of appropriation” (2009: 209), populations in sparsely populated areas could appear as not worthy of stricter control since the cost that this implied would not be balanced by a sufficient increase in revenues or exploitation of natural resources.
- 34 Finally, it should be noted that, like the friction of terrain, the friction of capital is exponential across difficult landscape. As noted, roads today crisscross areas that were mostly unreachable decades ago: dense rainforests, cold permafrost areas, high mountains, etc. But if the cost of displacement dramatically decreases along these roads, and to and from the population centers they connect, it rises extremely rapidly as soon as one leaves the road to enter the countryside, where there are no longer any good roads (if there are indeed any). Road connection does not by itself erase isolation if you need days to reach the road.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AGUIRRE BELTRÁN GONZALO, 1979.

Regions of Refuge, Washington, DC: Society for Applied Anthropology.

BOCCO GERARDO, 2016.

“Remoteness and Remote Places: A Geographic Perspective”, *Geoforum* no. 77, pp. 178-181.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.11.003>

CARSON DEAN B. & DORIS A. CARSON, 2014.

“Local Economies of Mobility in Sparsely Populated Areas: Cases from Australia’s Spine”, *Journal of Rural Studies* no. 36, pp. 340-349.

CARSON DEAN B. & JEN CLEARY, 2010.

“Virtual Realities: How Remote Dwelling Populations Become More Remote Over Time Despite Technological Improvements”, *Sustainability* no. 2/5, pp. 1282-1296. doi:10.3390/su2051282

GELLNER ERNEST, 1969.

Saints of the Atlas, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

GOHAIN SWARGAJYOTI, 2019.

“Selective Access: Or, How States Make Remoteness”, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* no. 27/2, pp. 204-220. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12650>

JONSSON HJORLEIFUR, 2010.

“Above and Beyond: Zomia and the Ethnographic Challenge of/for Regional History,” *History and Anthropology* no. 21/2, pp. 191-212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757201003793705>

LE TOURNEAU FRANÇOIS-MICHEL, 2020.

“Sparsely Populated Regions as a Specific Geographical Environment”, *Journal of Rural Studies* no. 75, pp. 70-79. <https://doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.12.012>

LE TOURNEAU FRANÇOIS-MICHEL, 2021.

“Brazilian Illegal Gold Miners resilience in French Guiana: The *Garimpo* as an Economic and Social System”, *European Review of Latin America and the Caribbean* no. 112, pp. 1-27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48658257>

LONSDALE RICHARD E. & JOHN H. HOLMES (eds), 1981.

Settlement Systems in Sparsely Populated Regions, Amsterdam, Elsevier.

MAGNUSSON JAN, 2021.

“Jellyfishing in the Postcolonial Nation-State: Baltistan Through the Zomia Lens”, *Asian Ethnology* no. 80/1, pp. 57-91.

MICHAUD JEAN, 2006.

Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif, Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press.

MICHAUD JEAN, 2010.

“Editorial-Zomia and Beyond”, *Journal of Global History* no. 5/2, pp. 187-214. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022810000057>

MICHAUD JEAN, 2017.

“What’s (Written) History For? On James C. Scott’s Zomia, Especially Chapter 6^{1/2}”, *Anthropology Today* no. 33/1, pp. 6-10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12322>

RIPPA ALESSANDRO, 2019.

“Zomia 2.0: Branding Remoteness and Neoliberal Connectivity in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, Laos”, *Social Anthropology* no. 27/2, pp. 253-269. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12649>

SCOTT JAMES C., 2009.

The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia, New Haven, Yale University Press, ProQuest Ebook Central.

VAN SCHENDEL WILLEM, 2002.

“Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* no. 20/6, pp. 647-668. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d16s>

WORLDPOP (www.worldpop.org – School of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Southampton; Department of Geography and Geosciences, University of Louisville; Departement de Géographie, Université de Namur) & Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University, 2020.

Global High Resolution Population Denominators Project – Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (OPP1134076). Online : <https://dx.doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/WP00647>

NOTES

1. Ruth Hammond, 2011, “The Battle over Zomia”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 September 2011, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-battle-over-zomia/>

ABSTRACTS

Working on a concept branded by Willem van Schendel, James Scott proposed in a 2009 essay a new and provocative view of the isolated societies that survived for a long time in the fringes of Himalayan and Southeast Asia, which could have formed a distinct region named Zomia. According to him, those populations were not the remnants of uncivilized tribes, as they have often been viewed in history, but peoples who had deliberately chosen to flee the domination of central states. But, for Scott, the conditions that made their independence and resilience possible vanished during the 1950ies, when technology made access to their regions easier. In this text, I argue that if we are seeing today an apparent domination of central states, which now cover the world continuously, geographical marginality engrained in the concept of Zomia remains hidden within their borders, often in the form of sparsely populated areas. These potentially constitute contemporary Zomias, which may have been internalized within the states, but still respond to a number of Scott's postulates.

Le concept de Zomia a été proposé par Willem van Schendel pour désigner une région montagneuse située en périphérie de l'Asie du Sud-Est et de l'Himalaya, restée à l'écart des grands empires. Reprenant cette idée, James Scott a proposé une théorie selon laquelle ces populations ne correspondraient pas à des tribus sans civilisation mais à des peuples qui auraient délibérément cherché à maintenir leur indépendance vis-à-vis des États centraux. Pour lui, les conditions de cette indépendance auraient disparu dans les années 1950, quand la technologie a rendu l'accès à ces zones plus facile. Dans cet article, je propose l'idée que si les États centraux couvrent aujourd'hui l'ensemble de la planète sans espaces entre eux, la marginalité géographique que désigne le concept de Zomia n'a pas disparu. Elle se maintient à l'intérieur de leurs frontières, souvent sous la forme de régions faiblement peuplées qui constituent autant de Zomias de l'intérieur, conservant un grand nombre des caractéristiques proposées par Scott.

INDEX

Keywords: sparsely populated areas, zomia, state, centrality, periphery, marginality

Mots-clés: région faiblement peuplées, Zomia, États centraux, centralité, périphéries, marginalité

AUTHOR

FRANÇOIS-MICHEL LE TOURNEAU

François-Michel Le Tourneau est géographe, directeur de recherche au CNRS. Particulièrement intéressé par la problématique des régions peu peuplées, ses terrains de recherche comprennent l'Amazonie brésilienne, l'Ouest américain et la Guyane.