



University of Zurich
URPP Asia and Europe

Invitation

Tuesday, 17 March 2010, 18:15–20:00
Universität Zürich Zentrum
Hörsaal KO2 F-152, Karl Schmid-Strasse 4, 8006 Zürich

Why Civilizations Can't Climb Hills: the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif

Guest Lecture
Prof. Dr. James C. Scott, Yale University, USA

James C. Scott is Sterling Professor of Political Science, professor of anthropology, and codirector of the Agrarian Studies Program, Yale University, and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Abstract:

"Zomia" is a new name for virtually all the lands lying above roughly 300 meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing six Southeast Asian nations. It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about 100 million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity. My thesis is simple, suggestive, and controversial. Zomia is the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation states. These hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare. Virtually everything about these people's livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, and even their illiteracy, can be read as strategic choices designed to keep the state at arms length. Their physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility, their cropping practices, their kinship structure, their pliable ethnic identities, and their devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders are designed to avoid incorporation into states.