

Thomas Gibson and Kenneth Sillander, eds. *Anarchic Solidarity: Autonomy, Equality, and Fellowship in Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies (Monograph 60), 2011. 310 pp.

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This collection of essays offers insightful views of the origins of egalitarianism, political autonomy, and social solidarity among small-scale societies in Southeast Asia. Among Southeast Asianists and anthropologists, James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* raised an important question about the nature of social solidarity among small-scale communities.¹ In contrast to modern society, in which authority, hierarchy, and coercion maintained by a central power serve as a social glue that binds together the members of society, these small societies showed neither authority nor hierarchy. No individuals could enforce coercion over others. Nevertheless, everyone enjoyed personal autonomy without having to fear any threats or attacks from others. Instead of a chaotic world characterized by unending conflicts among individuals as predicted by Hobbes, in these societies the absence of coercive power provided what social theorists call gregarious sociality (p. 23), fellowship, or companionship (pp. 34–35). It is the social condition where interactions among community members are characterized by equality and informality, in contrast to hierarchy and order. Is this solidarity determined by external pressures as Scott claims, or is it rooted in the internal condition of these societies?

As stated by Charles Macdonald in the introduction to the volume, the book is meant as an anthropological parallel to Scott's monograph. While Scott provides an historical account of social anarchism among the highland people of mainland Southeast Asia, *Anarchic Solidarity* is an ethnographic monograph of the island people. The former focuses on the "objective" utilitarian nature of social anarchism, which is to escape from state control, while the latter emphasizes the "subjective" components of social anarchism. To summarize briefly the whole argument in the volume under review, social anarchism is rooted not in the people's struggle to escape from the state, as Scott argues, but in the values, norms, and practices inherent in their culture. This "subjective" factor includes kinship, sharing, and certain cultural norms/values. All these cultural components are fertile grounds for the development of weak ties in these societies. In contrast to a strong tie, which carries with it deep personal or social commitment, a weak tie allows its holders to leave quite easily to make another weak alliance with another person. Therefore, under the preponderance of weak interpersonal commitments, the small societies under study could ensure personal autonomy while at the same time maintaining social solidarity among their members.

Indeed, the volume is successful in presenting the significance of values, norms, and practices inherent in the culture of these communities to maintaining their gregarious sociality. Nevertheless, a few comments are worth making to assess further the volume's theoretical contribution to social theory and to social development of small-scale societies. First of all, it has been argued that there are a variety of ways to explain the origins of social solidarity in such societies. According to Macdonald, these

¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

include historical, economic, and evolutionary approaches (p. 20). While the historical approach focuses on social and political processes that shape social interactions between different polities in a certain region, the economic (or material) approach assumes that dominance of mode of economic production is crucial in determining social formation of the society. Finally, the evolutionary approach will consider the innate predisposition of human nature in the development of a social system.

Scott's volume is an excellent example of the historical approach. Drawing on large historical records on the interaction among different groups in mainland Southeast Asia, Scott finds enough evidence for what he calls "nonstate spaces."² The choice of millions of minority people from various ethnic backgrounds to live in the hill area stretching from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India (approximately 2.5 million square kilometers) was made as a way to escape state control concentrated in the lowland areas. Challenging the widely circulated stereotype that hill people are primitive or barbarian due to their cultural or civilizational backwardness, Scott argues that these people deliberately chose to live differently due to their evasion of state control. The mode of subsistence, type of social formation, and pattern of physical mobility displayed by these people were determined by political choices based on strategic calculation of state evasion.³

By contrast, *Anarchic Solidarity* is rather eclectic. Unfortunately, historical and political encounters between different polities that might affect gregarious sociality of the subject under study do not get enough attention. Such issues were only slightly touched on in some articles (Geoffrey Benjamin, chapter 7; Clifford Sather, chapter 9; and James F. Eder, chapter 10). The rest of the articles use either material or evolutionary approaches, or a combination, to explain the persistence of open aggregation in small-scale societies. In "Sources of Socialibility in a Cosmological Frame" (chapter 2), Signe Howell argues that sociality is the inherently innate predisposition of human nature. Among the Chewong, this innate predisposition was further institutionalized by their ontological views that enforce the practice of sharing. Similarly, in "Childhood, Familiarity, and Social Life among East Semai" (chapter 4), Robert Dentan argues for the persistence of Hominine reproductive strategy in defining the Semai's life. He insists that "the east Semai solidarity in 1962 could be understood as basically evolutionary in origin, with a post hoc filigree of local explanations and rationalizations" (p. 110).

A substantial part of the volume is devoted to elucidating the role of kinship and sharing. It is argued that the practice of sharing constitutes the core culture of anarchic solidarity. Other than in kind, sharing could be practiced in words (Sather, chapter 9) or even in grievances (Lars Kaskija, chapter 8). Instead of requiring reciprocity or exchanges, as discussed by Marcell Mauss, sharing was simply an expression that every member of the community is equal, or at least not excluded. A person may ask another person to share what the latter gets from the forest or sea not because of any quid pro quo, but simply as an expression that the person asking for a share is also a member of the community who has the right to what other members may have (p. 274). Thus, sharing reinforces the equality and social solidarity among community

² Ibid., p. 13.

³ Ibid., p. x.

members. Similarly, the inclusive nature of kinship rules in these societies fosters the development of weak ties with the group's individual members. The cognatic descent system of the Palawan allows the creation of open collectivities. Even though Palawan kinship allows the development of core groups, the way in which these core groups are combined into larger groups allows individuals to choose from their neighborhoods partners with whom to cooperate outside the core group. Such cooperation is needed especially for economic and ritual purposes. But this social grouping is loose, and members may leave to make other groups. "Kinship ... does not define everything," writes Macdonald (p. 119). In a similar fashion, Sillander shows that kinship among the Bentian (chapter 6) does not automatically provide individuals with fellows to trust or with whom to cooperate. Instead, kinship needs to be enacted (achieved). Due to bilateral kinship, social relations among the Bentian are egocentric in nature. Individuals are not necessarily tied with their ascribed kinship group. Instead, kinship may be enacted or achieved through social relations with non-kin individuals driven by practical reasons instead of ascribed kinship (pp. 154–57).

In a word, all these accounts argue for the significance of culture inherent in the people's way of life in maintaining anarchic solidarity. Yet, without controlling the impact of historical and political processes that might affect the way the culture is constructed, we cannot be sure of the extent to which cultural properties are independent from these external pressures. In the case of mainland Southeast Asia, Scott argues that cultural properties such as kinship or mode of subsistence are not culturally or ecologically determined. Instead, they developed as a response to political pressure from state-making processes in the lowlands. Documentary records indicate that millions of people fled to the hill areas from the lowlands to avoid military conflicts or repression by kings or dynasties. In Java, Robert Hefner also found similar evidence for the concentration of people in mountainous regions.⁴ Thus, without taking such processes into account seriously, we may simply end up emphasizing cultural processes at the expense of overlooking those political factors that influenced the ways these hill cultures were constructed.

Indeed, it would be a challenging and time-consuming project to combine historical records with months or even years of field observation. But that could be the best way to solve the theoretical puzzle that a researcher often has to face in the final stages of his or her research. As Macdonald notes in his theoretical overview in chapter 2, there was a tension between reactionist and cultural preferences explanations in the accounts presented by the authors in this volume. While the reactionists accommodate the impact of political pressure from external powers, the cultural preferences explanations emphasize the existence of cultural values or norms that influenced the respective societies prior to these external pressures (p. 33). Nevertheless, answers to this puzzle should be primarily an empirical matter, instead of being based on theoretical assumptions or logical conclusions. Consider, for example, the different effect of kinship shown by Macdonald and Sillander (briefly discussed above) and the one presented by Benjamin in chapter 7. Unlike Macdonald and Sillander, Benjamin argues that both egalitarianism (among the Semang and Senoi) and ranking (among the Malayic ethnic groups) originated from the same culture matrix. It is the political

⁴ Robert W. Hefner, *The Political Economy of Mountain Java: An Interpretive History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

processes that separated these different cultural traditions and led to the mutual dissimilation among them (p. 177).

Ethnographic fieldwork would also benefit from use of the comparative method. Arguably, this volume has shown a remarkable interest in comparison. Some authors in the volume often clarify their argument by referring to similar or opposite cases in other ethnic groups or contexts. In my opinion, it would be much better if the comparison were carried out in a more systematic way by taking two or more cases in a single study. In fact, such a method is not new among anthropologists. It has been practiced by Clifford Geertz in his study of economic development in Java and Bali⁵ and of religious development in Indonesia and Morocco in the late sixties.⁶ Among sociologists and political scientists, new interests in comparative historical analysis have revived the vitality of the comparative approach in elucidating the fundamental problem of inference and causality.⁷ Comparative analysis would, for instance, be very useful to solve the issue of multicausality, which seems to obscure the general conclusion of the volume. As echoed by Kirk Endicott (p. 85), it may be argued that no single answer—say, reactionist response or cultural preference—will fit for all cases. Nevertheless, further specification is needed to clarify under what political or economic conditions external pressures define the nature of social solidarity of these small societies and under what conditions such pressures might not be influential.

Finally, the volume also raises an important question about social change and the future of small-scale societies. Increased interaction with outsiders or the intrusion of money into subsistence economies has changed some aspects of these communities' culture and social life. Among the Chewong, for instance, Howell observed how cash-generating activities that came in with logging operations near Chewong settlements eroded the practice of sharing that constituted the Chewong core culture. Monetization has further corrupted Chewong social solidarity as the newly arrived concept of wealth has created inequalities among the members of the community. Many believe that these developments did not contribute anything but poverty. Similarly, the Punan also expressed their grievances and disappointment over what happened to the fate of the community. "Everywhere," Kaskija writes, "Punan consider themselves to be the victims of discrimination and injustice" (p. 218). It is unfortunate that these issues did not get the attention they deserve from the authors of the volume.

All these comments, however, do not nullify the significant contribution the volume makes to the development of social theory and ethnographic understanding of the origins of social solidarity among small-scale societies. Theoretically reflective and rich in ethnographic details, the volume provides a solid foundation for further research on social solidarity and small-scale societies. Among anthropologists in particular, the volume may bring back the idea of comparative ethnography that Clifford Geertz initiated five decades ago in the core of anthropological analysis.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 1963).

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁷ See James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Alexander L George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).