



# Theory from the hills

Bengt G. Karlsson  
Stockholm University

*Highlander* suggests that geography, and especially, altitude matters. And indeed things look different depending on where you stand. Climb a mountain and the perspective changes as does the landscape itself; the flora, fauna, smells, the air and much more change. High altitude gives a sense of clarity, you can see further out in the distance, things otherwise hidden reveal themselves and patterns, traces, paths emerge. It is perhaps no surprise that mountains are places of introspection and spiritual quests. Yet again how altitude matters in a more precise manner in the workings of society is harder to tell. James C. Scott famously argues that hills are difficult to govern and therefore allow for more egalitarian, democratic and non-state types of politics to flourish (2009). His take on “Zomia”, originally proposed by Willem van Schendel, has encouraged scholars to think of regions, and geography more generally, outside the dominant framework of nation-states. For Scott, the hills carry a political vision of an anarchist or acephalous society. Indeed, we need to be reminded that another world is possible. Zomia is a powerful image for this.

But in reading *The Art of Not Being Governed* I get the impression that Scott nevertheless see things from the plains, that is, that he is operating with a centrist, valley-centric ontology (Karlsson 2013). The hills are presented as a place of escape, it is where people run to in order to evade taxation, conscription and other punitive measures imposed by the coercive state based in the valley. Hills, in other words, appear as the second best option. Yet as we gather from everyday conversation, stories, creation myths and the sacred geography of many hill peoples, mountains are in all respects considered a better or preferred place to be. It is closer to the gods and purer, less crowded, with cleaner air and water, more beautiful and tastier food and so on. The Khasis, it is held, descended on earth through a golden ladder on the sacred mountain Lum Sohpet Bneng (Nongkynrih 2007:4). The hills, thus, are the birth-place of the people and where most Khasis anchor their sense of belonging.

## I

My point here is not to criticize Scott. To the contrary, I would like to bring him along to press for novel thinking and theorizing from the hills. What happens if we refract history through the prism of altitude? What can “theory from the hills” be? Here we can take the cue from Jean and John Comaroff’s *Theory From the South* (2012). As they write, the global south has mainly

figured as a place of ‘unprocessed data’ or raw facts that Western scholars turn into “testable theories and transcendent truths” (2012:1). What would happen, they go on to ask, if we “invert the order of things”, if we “subvert the epistemic scaffolding”, and hence “approached theory work from a primary African vantage” (2012:1-2). Such reprogramming seems equally called for while taking the hills as our point of departure.

Theory work, as I see it, need not be reduced to the grappling with high theory and abstract reasoning, but rather, and arguably more importantly, be a more grounded activity of “theorizing”. The latter, as elegantly laid out by Richard Swedberg in his book *The Art of Social Theory* (2014), begins with observation, with being an attentive observer and creative thinker. In Swedberg’s step-by-step formula for creative theorizing, the researcher should first conduct a pre-study where he or she “observe, and focus in on something interesting or surprising to study”, and subsequently name the phenomenon, develop concepts, analogies, and types to capture the process or pattern of the phenomenon selected (2014:28). Theorizing, like a lot of other things people do, is a craft that has to be learned. The more one practices, the better one gets.

What I would like to stress here is Swedberg’s insistence on observation as central in theory work. For the social sciences scholar to be attentive to that which goes on in society. This might seem self-evident, how could it be otherwise? Indeed, but looking at the research on the Northeastern hill societies, I think it is fair to say that until recently much of it suffers from a colonial blockage where authority is vested with colonial texts - monographs, reports, gazetteers - at the expense of observations and analysis of the present state of affairs. Take the example of the much-discussed traditional institutions. A commonly asked question today is: who exercises influence over, has a say and can hold offices in village council or similar local governing bodies. The role of women has been especially debated. When such questions are raised scholars tend not run to the field to see for themselves, say how a village council meeting transpires, but instead consult the colonial archive to figure out how the village council is supposed to function or how it functioned in the by-gone era. This also goes for several other key phenomenon like land management, kinship, social stratification, agriculture/shifting cultivation and ecological knowledge; there is, at least in the Northeastern hill region, an acute lack of in-depth studies of how things actually work today.

Here I must hastily add that there are important exceptions and during last ten years a new breed of highly innovative, empirically rich and theoretically savvy scholarship is emerging (cf. Vandenhelsken, Barkataki-Ruschewegh and Karlsson 2018). What we see there and, which is my general point, are scholars who leave the safety of their desks and get their hands dirty working through the messy, contradictory and unruly social reality unfolding in everyday contexts. To observe with an open mind requires a curious mind, a willingness to listen and learn, and be open to surprises. After all, the point with good research is to engage with phenomenon that strikes you as intriguing and important, and to ask questions you are unable to answer in advance. Looking at things from the vantage of the hills further calls for openness to indigenous lifeworlds, and to entertain the possibility that different epistemologies and ontologies are at play. Such scholarship called for here is not an unattainable ideal, but something that, as mentioned, is already happening. If Northeast India, as well as other parts of

Zomia, was created as the margins to, or peripheries of, the newly independent nation-states in South and Southeast Asia, theorizing from the hills turns this on its head, making the periphery the new centre. This alone generates new questions and subsequent answers.

## II

Something that recently struck me as both highly disturbing and intriguing is the backlash against women that seems to be sweeping across India's Northeastern hills. And of course, a similar backlash has been noted for other parts of the world, perhaps even being, as some observers argue, a universal phenomenon. But we still need to ask about or try to make sense of the increasing misogynist sentiments that seems to be taking hold in many Northeastern hill societies. It has often been argued that women in the hills are relatively better off than their sisters in the plains. They have more freedom, they are well educated and have entered more or less all walks of professional life. Yet as several scholars and feminist intellectuals been arguing recently, things are not as ideal for women as the standard account would have it. A recent volume of female scholars, artists and writers from the Northeast bring such experiences to the fore (Singh 2017). Decades of armed sovereignty struggles have had detrimental effects for women with increasing levels of domestic violence, sexual assault and insecurities (Kikon 2015). Two recent events have also highlighted the vulnerability of women in the Northeast. The 2017 controversy relating to the 33 percent quotas for women in local governing bodies in Nagaland highlighted the gendered politics in the state. Similarly, the 2018 events in Meghalaya highlighted the attempt of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council in Meghalaya to introduce a new lineage bill that denies community membership and rights to Khasi women who marry outside the tribe. In both these instances, women who voiced strong positions - advocating for the implementation of the 33 percent representation in the first case, and speaking up against the new bill in the second - have been publically condemned, and castigated as being against their respective communities. In several instances, individual women have been targeted in social media in a most offensive manner. This arguably calls for closer investigations, looking at the particular conjunctures that might help explain the present gendering of the hill polities.

A field of scholarship I am vested in myself concerns the environment or nature more broadly. We can note a major tension between subsistence agriculture with often meagre and diminishing returns, on the one hand, and the extractive industries that generate large profits for some of the main actors involved, on the other. While there are different and interrelated dynamics at work in the two respective domains, the general picture is one of environmental gloom. The younger generation does not see a future in working the land, and many leave for salaried work in the metropolitan areas of India (cf. Kikon & Karlsson 2019). Hydro-power projects, mining and other extractive industries have an enormous ecological impact and undermines local livelihoods (Baruah 2012).

Climate change adds to an already troubling situation. In the recent IPCC report Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees Celsius high mountain ranges are identified as one of the most affected areas globally. While there is scientific disagreement about how fast the Himalayan

glaciers are melting, the long-term projection is nevertheless clear; the glaciers are disappearing and with this there will be an increase in floods, landslides, and eventually water shortage in the entire region. This is already experienced in several of the Northeastern states. In Arunachal Pradesh a research team notes an increase in average temperature, fewer cold days, more erratic rainfall and longer dry spells, which have severe consequences for agriculture and food security. As the team concludes, “(T)he Eastern Himalayan region is likely to face the highest reductions in agricultural potential due to climate change” (Bhagawati et al. 2017:538). The IPCC has introduced the term “climate resilient development pathways” and what this could mean in the context of the hill areas of Northeast India and beyond stands out as a major political and intellectual challenge today. As scholars in the social sciences and the humanities, we cannot afford to remain silent. What exactly our intervention could be is up for debate. Personally I see several promising openings in fields like environmental history, political ecology, multispecies ethnography, critical plant and animal studies.

### III

As a conclusion I would like to end by expressing my hope that the Highlander Journal will become a platform for critical scholarship on present societal and environmental matters. In a recent article about small-scale gardens run by a women’s organization in Tanzania called Training, Research, Monitoring and Evaluation on Gender and AIDS (TRMEGA), anthropologist Stacey Ann Langwick (2018) ends with a set of questions that also speak to the part of the world that we are concerned with here. She writes,

They (the gardens) are experiments in creating spaces for a new politics of habitability, one that continually asks: What kinds of lushness can be cultivated in twenty-first-century Tanzania? What relations enable bodies and landscapes to grow ampler, denser, more productive and more potent? Whose ongoingness and what forms of continuance do our gardens support? (Langwick 2018:436).

Being attentive to the multitude of “ongoingness” is not only a useful device in scholarship but also in life in these uncertain times. To live responsibly in the Anthropocene is a challenge for us all, but one that stands out even more so in the hills where the effects, most likely, will hit harder and sooner.

### References

- Baruah, Sanjib (2012) “Whose River Is It Anyway? Political Economy of Hydropower in Eastern Himalayas”, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 21, Vol. XLVII, No. 29: 41-52.
- Bhagawati, Rupankar et al. (2017) “Review of Climate Change and Impact on Agriculture of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeastern Himalayan Region of India”, in *Nature Environment and Pollution Technology*, Vol. 16(2):535-539.

- Comaroff, Jean and John (2012) *Theory From the South: or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa*, Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers.
- IPCC (2018) *Global Warming of 1.5 Degrees Celsius*, Special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.
- Karlsson, Bengt G. (2013) "Evading the State: Ethnicity in Northeast India through the lens of James Scott", in *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 72(2): 321-331.
- Kikon, Dolly (2015) *Life and Dignity: Women's Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Dimapur (Nagaland)*, Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre.
- Kikon, Dolly & Bengt G. Karlsson (2019, forthcoming) *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Langwick, Stacey Ann (2018) "A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World", in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 33(3): 415-443.
- Nonkynrih, Kynpham Sing (2007) *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, Gurgaon: Penguin Books.
- Singh, Parismita (2017) *Centrepiece: New Writings and Art from Northeast India*, New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Swedberg, Richard (2014) *The Art of Social Theory*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Vandenhelsken, Melanie, Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruschewegh & Bengt G. Karlsson Eds. (2018) *Geographies of Difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies*, New York and New Delhi: Routledge.
-