

Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States

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Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States is the latest from highly respected political scientist James C. Scott. In the book, Scott, no stranger to cultural and environmental anthropologists with his groundbreaking ethnographic and political work in Southeast Asia, again ventures outside of his disciplinary expertise into the realm of archaeologists, particularly specialists in ancient Mesopotamia and the Middle East. *Against the Grain* is a consideration of the processes of domestication of plants, animals, and humans and a summary of the latest material on the earliest period of state-making. Scott, per usual, adds his unique anarchist perspective to the questions of the earliest civilizations on earth and covers much ground of interest to archaeologists, agricultural anthropologists, and others who study the origins of agriculture and the state.

In the introduction, Scott makes an interesting decision to back-date the advent of the Anthropocene from the Industrial Revolution to the discovery of fire by hominids some 400,000 years ago. He brings attention to the underappreciated landscape-altering and niche-creating role that fire has played in hominid/landscape interactions. I still have a major problem considering fire-wielding pre-*Homo sapiens* hominids as anything closely comparable to late 18th century industrializing England when classifying the onset of the geological era of human domination, but Scott delineates a “thin” Anthropocene of early fire utilization (and state-making, as well) from a “thick” Anthropocene of more recent industrial processes. His typology is mainly based on matters of scale in human population numbers. I’m not sure such classificatory nuance is necessary regarding the Anthropocene, but I do appreciate his bringing more attention to the

importance of anthropogenic fire in landscapes and the major influence it has had on the hominid trajectory.

Scott questions much of the commonly received wisdom on the origins of agriculture and the state based on updated archaeological evidence. Two prevailing, outdated assumptions are that the post-Neolithic Revolution witnessed near-immediate and welcomed transitions into grain-dependent sedentary lifeways. In actuality, state-level political organization did not occur until over 4,000 years after the earliest signs of plant and animal domestication, and there is ample evidence that most mobile cultures staunchly resisted the pull toward permanent settlement and resulting social stratification. Where sedentary societies did form in ecologically rich microclimates (typically marshy, alluvial environments), they did so well before agriculture was widespread.

In what should be no surprise to anthropologists, Scott undermines the narrative of state dominance over the past 10,000 years. He sets the year 1600 C.E., in the midst of the Age of Exploration, as the point in history when state hegemony fully takes hold. Before 1600, at least one-third of the occupied globe was peopled by populations of foragers, pastoralists, independent horticulturalists, and shifting cultivators—non-agrarians outside of state control. This is consistent with anthropological insight that the state is the newest, most volatile, and shortest-lived form of human organization. As Scott puts it: “In most cases, interregna, fragmentation, and ‘dark ages’ were more common than consolidated, effective rule” (15). He also argues that in many areas of the world the state was a seasonal institution. In much of Southeast Asia during the annual monsoon rains, the power of the state “shrank back virtually to its palace walls” (15).

In Chapters Two and Three, Scott develops a typology that I think is one of the more brilliant insights in the book: *The Late Neolithic Multispecies Resettlement Camp*. Forwarding a different perspective than the usual “humans domesticated plants and animals” just-so story, Scott takes a page out of Michael Pollen’s popular *Botany of Desire* approach, noting that plants, animals, insects, diseases and other organisms have

domesticated us for their own benefits as much as we have them. Dogs, sparrows, wheat, mice, weevils, ticks, bedbugs, influenza—some of whom were invited, others of whom were not—find the niche of the human *domus* much to their liking, survivability, and evolutionary potential. As human drudgery increases and we are left ploughing, planting, weeding, threshing, grinding, keeping pests out of our grain stores, and finding cures for new diseases, it begs the question: Have we not been domesticated ourselves and been active agents in our own domestication? Anthropologists should appreciate Scott's discussion of these questions, as he brings current archaeological data from ancient Mesopotamia into conversation with some of our more important recent theoretical trends, most notably multi-species ethnography and the ontological turn.

Chapter Four covers ground that is well known to anthropologists. Scott defines what an actual state is, using an insightful continuum of "stateness" based on a conglomeration of familiar variables: taxable grain agriculture, walls for protection and confinement, systems of writing, and officials. By these standards, Scott identifies the first ever human state-level society (Uruk) as being fully formed by 5200 BP. Chapter Five focuses on early state means for controlling and growing their populations—mainly through conquest warfare (including a focus on capturing women of reproductive age), forced resettlement into the "grain core," slavery, and walls for keeping citizens in. Scott views such early state practices as fitting into his overall theme of domestication; captives and slaves are the evidence of elite desires to domesticate humans and bend them to their will, much as Neolithic humans had done to animals and plants (apparently, though, without the Michael Pollan-esque mutualistic desires of multi-species interrelationships).

The collapse of early states is the subject of Chapter Six. Following the lead of archaeologists, Scott notes that "collapses" are multi-variate, with both intrinsic and extrinsic causes; he chooses to focus on intrinsic causes, including the effects of disease due to concentration of humans and other species, upstream deforestation and siltation, and the salinization of soil due to intensive agriculture. Shifting the lens on common perspectives regarding the negative aspects of "collapse," Scott ponders whether state disintegration

should be regarded instead as a positive outcome that witnesses the destruction of an oppressive, hierarchal social order. Following his discussion of state collapse, Chapter Seven addresses the nature of barbarians, meaning "the vast population not subjected to state control" (32). Scott's analysis of barbarian populations is extensive and enlightening, containing insightful jewels. For early states, barbarians posed the biggest threats to state expansion, civilization being something of a concentrated foraging site for non-state marauders. Scott quotes the famous Berber saying, "raiding is our agriculture." Once state rulers grasped this reality, they began to pay groups to protect trade and travel routes, and states/barbarians became, essentially, competing protection rackets. This situation resulted in what Scott calls "The Golden Age of Barbarians" (219), which persisted until much later when states gained greater control over non-state peoples. At this point the book abruptly ends. The last sentence reads, "By systematically replenishing the state's manpower base by slaving and by protecting and expanding the state with its military services, the barbarians willingly dug their own grave" (256). It is a curious move and leaves the reader wanting for a more comprehensive conclusion, despite the wealth of information in the book.

Against the Grain is an excellent and useful book, despite tailing off at the end, and it comes at a good time, as our global civilization shows multiple signs of collapse. I'm thinking of using it along with David Graeber's *Debt* in my upper-division economic anthropology course. *Against the Grain* outlines the gradual material transformations that were happening preceding and into early state-making, and Graeber, in great historical detail, tells us the rest of the story about how our modern global economy came to be. *Against the Grain* is also approachable to non-specialists and non-academics. It is probably no coincidence that Scott and Graeber, both of whom are anarchists, provide some of the most original and piercing insights into the institution of the state and how it has failed us throughout its short and violent history—a history characterized by power, hierarchy, exploitation, and oppression. *Against the Grain* gives us further historical and archaeological evidence that may help inform the project of dismantling the state and creating more egalitarian and less oppressive future human social institutions.