

**Review of James C. Scott. 2017. *Against the grain: a deep history of the earliest states*. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN 978-0-300-24021-4 (pbk). xvii + 311 pp.**

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Jim Scott is well known in political ecology for his work on peasant moral economy (1976), the arts of everyday resistance (1985), states' propensities to simplify for legibility (1990), and the hill tribes of Zomia (2009). In this most recent book, Scott applies the familiar ideas of his previous work in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century southeast Asia to – surprise! – ancient, dry Mesopotamia. He explores the origins of farming, settlement, and states, and finds – no surprise! – peasant resistance, state pressures for legibility, and barbarians on the hilly margins playing major roles.

The ideas and evidence upon which he builds his book are nothing new – he relies on a reading of the archaeological literature in terms of both the concrete details as well as many of the concepts and debates. Not knowing this archaeological literature myself, I take him at his word. What is new is Scott's way of putting the pieces together and spinning a set of coherent arguments about the 'deep history' of the earliest states. It is complete statement of what might be called a Jim Scott theory of agrarian states and their non-state, anarchist alter egos. A strength of Scott has always been his attention to non-state sources and histories – a favourite quip of his at the Yale Agrarian Studies seminars was that "the job of a peasant is precisely to stay *out* of the archives."

Scott eloquently takes the reader on a journey through a diverse range of key arguments that build upon each other, touching on concepts as varied as plant and animal domestication, state formation and collapse, and barbarians. He begins with grains in the Fertile Crescent, showing how wild gathering, proto-agriculture, and cultivation of grains has long been one part (and only a part) of more diverse subsistence strategies from very early on. Wetland areas, such as the lower Tigris and Euphrates flood plains, permitted large carrying capacities of people, even early cities, due to the diversity and richness of the resources found there – but without large scale grain farming. Scott shows that nobody in their right mind would undertake fixed-place grain-centred agriculture unless constrained to do so.

States appeared as people figured out how to control grain and cities. States, in this study, are defined pragmatically based on elements visible in the archaeological record: walls, tax collection, officials. Grains were ideal for states because they are taxable and controllable – i.e. legible to state agents. They can be counted, weighed, divided, transported, stored, predicted, and have a defined harvest season. States needed to control people more than territory. They needed to have a labour force to produce the surplus grains. Wars were fought for people – slaves and other forms of labourers – more than for territory or other spoils.

People often sought to leave state control. Laboring in a city-state meant a tough life: the poor nutrition associated with a largely-grain based diet, diseases linked to urban concentration, and a tough life under a heavy-handed state elite. The friction of distance meant states over-exploited nearby land and people. So when they could, people periodically escaped to the outskirts – hills, wetlands, deserts, and other non-state areas.

Who are these people, the barbarians and tribesmen? They are often relatively mobile pastoralists or shifting cultivators. They are the barbarians of history-as-told-by-the-state-elites, but are better seen as people free from the state. In Scott's words, "tribes begin where the states end"; "the antonym for tribe is peasant, that is, a state subject". Barbarians or tribal people exist as a kind of *yan* to the state's *yin*. Indeed they need the state to exist, or at least to be named. Scott suggests 'state people' and 'nonstate people' as better, non-freighted categories. He also proposes a different perspective on what was seen by state scribes as barbarian raiding activities. He says raiding could be seen as a hunting and gathering strategy, preying on the easily grabbed resources of sedentary farmers and states, as parasites of settled agriculture. "Why should one go to the trouble of growing a crop", Scott asks rhetorically, "when, like the state(!), one can simply confiscate it from the granary?"

Finally, Scott moves to state collapse. Dark ages, and intermediate periods where states collapsed or were weak, actually dominate early history. Collapse happened all the time for many reasons – climate, war, raiding, disease, over-harvesting, degradation. For much of pre-history, the existence of states was ephemeral, was exceptional, and quite unstable. According to Scott, life was often better between periods of state domination for most of the people – though this was not documented, as no monumental state was there to keep records.

Scott's messages are strong if taken to their extremes – a deep scepticism of the tendencies of states, an empathy for migrants and refugees from overbearing states, a romanticism for nomadic tribalism, and a celebration of food diversity versus grain dependency for not just nutritional but also political reasons.

What should political ecologists make of this? It fully qualifies as a political ecology text in the sense elaborated by Paul Robbins (2004) – in that it starts from a contradiction (a civilizational narrative of progress versus archaeological evidence), comments on the evolution of thought in archaeology and history, pays attention to winners and losers, and tells the story dialectically. It could be criticized for taking a relatively monolithic approach to statecraft, and a somewhat simplistic, glamorized vision of tribal life – an idealized agenda of anarchy. It eschews current trends towards writing about impermanent conjunctures and assemblages, returning to old-fashioned causality. In this Scott builds on the archaeological, archeobotanical, and agroecological literatures into which he plunged in order to prepare his book. In doing so, Scott also gives pride of place to (socio-)ecological conditions – to 'materiality' in today's terms. Rich in ideas, masterful in its execution, Jim Scott has done it again.

## References

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