

The Golden Age of the Barbarians

Excerpt from *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*

James C. Scott

2017

James C. Scott has written extensively on how people have transitioned from tribal societies to civilization as part of the process of state formation, and how resistance to state domination has occurred in this context.

In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* and *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, he explores tools for state control of subjects, such as permanent last names, standardization of language and legal discourse, regularized weights and measures, records of numbers of people and wealth in land and other property, as well as the design of cities and transportation.

In his latest book, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (Yale, 2017), Scott focuses on the integral relationships between the waging of war, slavery, and state formation, as well as the multifaceted relationships between agriculture and civilization.

He also discusses the many ways that non-state people developed to resist being drawn into states or to escape them.

Scott challenges the dominant idea that people have necessarily been happier, healthier, and safer living in densely populated state dominated urban centers than in small decentralized social groupings.

He describes how centralization of control leads to increases in inequalities and hierarchies within societies (including between rich and poor and between men and women), intensified forced labor, increases in infectious diseases, narrowing of diets, and impoverishing of the eco-system. All of these provide good reasons why people have often wanted to escape from states.

In this context, Scott suggests the breakdown of civilization can be viewed as a possibly positive event, often inaugurating salutary reformulation of social relations.

In the book and in the excerpts below, Scott uses the term barbarian ironically and positively to designate non-state people, those who resist state rule. However, He refuses to oversimplify or schematize the history of barbarian resistance to states, and acknowledges that barbarians have frequently collaborated with and even ended by strengthening them.

The history of the peasants is written by the townsmen

The history of the nomads is written by the settled

The history of the hunter-gatherers is written by the farmers

The history of the non-state peoples is written by the court scribes

All may be found in the archives catalogued under "Barbarian Histories."

Looked at from outer space in 2500 BCE, the very earliest states in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley (for example, Harrapan) would have been scarcely visible. In, say, 1500 BCE there would have been a few more centers (Maya and the Yellow River), but their overall geographical presence may actually have shrunk. Even at the height of the Roman and early Han "super-states," the area of their effective control would have been stunningly modest. With respect to population, the vast majority throughout this period (and arguably up until at least 1600

CE) were still non-state peoples: hunters and gatherers, marine collectors, horticulturalists, swiddeners, pastoralists, and a good many farmers who were not effectively governed or taxed by any state. The frontier, even in the Old World, was still sufficiently capacious to beckon those who wished to keep the state at arm's length.

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Barbarian geography corresponded with what is distinctive about barbarian ecology and demography. As a residual category it describes modes of subsistence and settlement that are not those of the state grain core. In a Sumerian myth, the goddess Adnigkidu is admonished not to wed a nomad god, Martu, as follows: "He who dwells in the mountains...having carried on much strife...he knows not submission, he eats uncooked food, he has no house where he lives, he is not interred when he dies..." One can scarcely imagine a more telling mirror image of life as a grain-producing, domus-based state subject.

The Record of Rites (Liji) of the Zhou Dynasty contrasts the barbarian tribes who ate meat (raw or cooked) instead of the "grain food" of the civilized. Among the Romans, the contrast between their diet of grain and the Gallic diet of meat and dairy products was a key marker of their claim to civilized status.

Barbarians were dispersed and highly mobile, and lived in small settlements. They might be shifting cultivators, pastoralists, fisher folk, hunter-gatherers, foragers, or small-scale collector-traders. They might even plant some grain and eat it, but grain was unlikely to be their dominant staple as it was for state subjects. They were, by virtue of their mobility, their diverse livelihoods, and their dispersal, unsuitable raw material for appropriation and state building, and it was for precisely these reasons that they were called barbarians.

Such distinctions admitted of differences in degree, and this, in turn, served to demarcate, for the state, those barbarians who were plausible candidates for civilization from those who were beyond the pale.

To Roman eyes, the Celts, who cleared land, raised some grain, and built trading towns (*oppida*), were "high-end" barbarians, while acephalous, mobile hunting bands were irredeemable. Barbarian societies can, like the *oppida* Celts, be quite hierarchical, but their hierarchy is generally not based on inherited property and is typically flatter than the hierarchy found in agrarian kingdoms.

The vagaries of geography often meant that the central grain-core territory was fragmented by, say, hills and swamps, in which case the state's core might include several "unincorporated" barbarian areas. A state often bypassed or hopped over recalcitrant zones in the process of knitting together nearby arable areas.

The Chinese, for example, distinguished between "inner barbarians," who were in such quarantined areas, and "outer barbarians," at the frontiers of the state. The civilizational narratives of the early states imply, if they don't state directly, that some primitives, through luck or cleverness, domesticated crops and animals, founded sedentary communities, and went on to found towns and states. They left primitivism behind for state and civilization.

The barbarians, according to this account, are the ones who did not make the transition, those who remained outside. After this great divergence there were two spheres: the civilized sphere of settlement, towns, and states on the one hand and the primitive sphere of mobile, dispersed hunters, foragers, and pastoralists on the other. The membrane between the two spheres was permeable, but only in one direction. Primitives could enter the sphere of civilization—this was, after all, the grand narrative—but it was inconceivable that the "civilized" could ever revert to primitivism.

We now know this view to be, on the historical evidence, fundamentally wrong. It is mistaken for at least three reasons.

First, it ignores the millennia of flux and movement back and forth between sedentary and non-sedentary modes of subsistence and the many mixed options in between. Fixed settlement and plough agriculture were necessary to state making, but they were just part of a large array of livelihood options to be taken up or abandoned as conditions changed.

Second, the very act of establishing a state and its subsequent enlargement was itself typically an act of displacement. Some of the pre-existing population may have been absorbed, but others, perhaps a majority, may have moved out of range. Many of a state's adjacent barbarian populations may well have been, in effect, refugees from the state-making process itself.

Third, once states were created, as we have seen, there were frequently as many reasons for fleeing them as for entering them. If, as the standard narrative suggests, people are attracted to the state for the opportunities

and security that it offers, it is also true that high rates of mortality coupled with flight from the state sphere were sufficiently offsetting that slaving, wars for capture, and forced resettlement seemed integral to the manpower needs of the early state.

The key point for our purposes is that, once established, the state was disgorging subjects as well as incorporating them. Causes for flight varied enormously—epidemics, crop failures, floods, salinization, taxes, war, and conscription—provoking both a steady leakage and occasionally a mass exodus.

Some of the runaways went to neighboring states, but a good many of them—perhaps especially captives and slaves—left for the periphery and other modes of subsistence. They became, in effect, barbarians by design. Over time an increasingly large proportion of non-state peoples were not “pristine primitives” who stubbornly refused the domus, but ex—state subjects who had chosen, albeit often in desperate circumstances, to keep the state at arm’s length.

This process, detailed by many anthropologists, among whom [French Anthropologist] Pierre Clastres is perhaps the most famous, has been called “secondary primitivism.” The longer states existed, the more refugees they disgorged to the periphery. Places of refuge where they accumulated over time became “shatter zones,” as their linguistic and cultural complexity reflected that they were peopled by various pulses of refugees over an extended period.

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A GOLDEN AGE?

There is, I believe, a long period, measured not in centuries but in millennia—between the earliest appearance of states and lasting until perhaps only four centuries ago—that might be called a “golden age for barbarians” and for non-state peoples in general.

For much of this long epoch, the political enclosure movement represented by the modern nation-state did not yet exist. Physical movement, flux, an open frontier, and mixed subsistence strategies were the hallmark of this entire period.

Even the exceptional and often short-lived empires of this long epoch (the Roman, Han, Ming, and in the New World the Mayan peer polities and the Inka) could not impede large-scale population movements in and out of their political orbit. Hundreds and hundreds of petty states formed, thrived briefly, and decomposed into their elementary social units of villages, lineages, or bands.

While the increase in population would have, by itself, encouraged more intensive subsistence strategies, the fragility of the state, its exposure to epidemics, and a large non-state periphery would not have allowed us to discern anything like state hegemony until, say, 1600 CE at the earliest.

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2017

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