

Against the State; Against the Grain

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a review of

Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States by James C. Scott. Yale University Press, 2017 yale-books.yale.edu

In his latest book, James Scott continues his exploration of the relationship between domestication and the development of hierarchies of power in pre-modern and modern societies. He is particularly interested in examining the situations of people who resisted being incorporated into states. *Against the Grain* rejects the view that human history is a story of linear progression leading to the conveniences of contemporary civilization.

Scott also challenges the primitivist perspective of a one-way process of loss of innocence and alienation from the wild—as hunter-gatherers were domesticated into agriculture and then subjugation by states.

Scott, a Yale professor of political science and anthropology, discusses two basic categories, barbarians and savages and their relationship to states. He defines barbarians as groups (often pastoralists) not subject to state authorities but who may pose a military threat to them. However, they may, at times, develop cooperative relations with them.

Savages are defined as people considered by state officials to be culturally incapable of cooperation (generally foraging and hunting bands), who pose no real military threat to the power of states. Both groups are viewed with hostility by state elites because they set inappropriate examples for domesticated state subjects.

In discussing the diverse circumstances and societal forms of groups resisting state rule, Scott brings together recently developed research that challenges earlier ideas about how the natural environment may have shaped and been shaped over the millennia by human societies (as well as by our hominid ancestors). He also examines a growing body of material relevant to understanding more about how civilizations began.

Scott avoids presenting an oversimplified picture of those who resisted civilization as admirable and those who submitted to it as pitiful and contemptible. He recognizes there have been significant differences between groups at different times and places. Groups resisting civilization while living on the fringes of states and empires have had a variety of complex interactions with neighboring authoritarian societies.

Some groups of barbarians living near societies governed by elites helped strengthen the power of centralized authorities by providing them with slaves and soldiers. On the other hand, sometimes such groups assisted slaves to escape the grip of the state, thereby weakening it by causing labor shortages. Most so-called barbarians living on the fringes of organized states, through most of history, have been those who ran away from states rather than people who were never exposed to them.

Only those living far from the reach of states and empires have been able to escape these complex relationships completely.

For Scott, fire is probably the most important tool humans employed for shaping and being shaped by the environment. He notes that evidence for its use is now dated at least 400,000 years ago.

It predates the development of agriculture 12,000 years ago, and new findings indicate that it may have been used by hominids before the appearance of modern humans.

Fire enabled hunter-gatherers to adapt the landscape around them—to clear areas and make them available for fast-growing, prey-attracting plants and for hunting. The ability to use it for cooking allowed humans to extract more energy from food than most other animals can, and to eat a far wider range of plants and animals.

Recent archaeological research has found that some people lived in settled communities long before the adoption of agriculture—as much as four thousand years earlier—demonstrating that agriculture is not necessarily what makes settled life possible, as was previously argued. Environments rich in a wide variety of food sources, such as wetlands, enabled hunter-gatherers to settle in one place for long periods.

Current evidence indicates that there were complex societies possessing abstract thought long before agricultural systems developed. This challenges the idea that sophisticated technologies and agriculture are causally linked to the development of state systems. Scott describes groups which demonstrated sophisticated technical knowledge, but were not subjugated by states.

He also challenges the idea that all agriculture necessarily leads to the development of hierarchies and state consolidation. He discusses how the cultivation of certain specific crops, namely cereal grains—that could be monitored by tax collectors and other state officials—were much more significant for the development of state domination than other domesticated crops. This is due, Scott notes, to the fact that they are “visible, divisible, assessable, storable, transportable, and rationable,” all at the same time.

Moreover, research has shown that the adoption of agriculture and state bureaucracy has not necessarily been a one-way process. Some groups abandoned agriculture in favor of hunting and gathering to cope with environmental challenges and/or to gain freedom from onerous state controls.

This is a book with strong anarchist ideas. While Scott is not optimistic about current possibilities for escaping state dominance, he expresses in *Against The Grain* and elsewhere his firm opposition to societies that allow disparities in wealth and power.

He notes that there are always good reasons for resistance because states’ interests and the interests of those ruled are not just different, but are usually opposed to each other. To cite just one example, state elites have always waged wars in order to expand their dominance over resources, including more subjugated human beings. But the pursuit of these goals is counter to the life and well-being of those under their sway as well as those outside their rule.

Gaining a more nuanced idea of how current destructive power relations came to be and the varied ways peoples have resisted in the past might help us figure out new ways to escape the state.

For an excerpt from *Against the Grain* see: “The Golden Age of the Barbarians,” FE #399, Fall, 2017, at fiftes-tate.org/archive.

When Gracie Forest isn’t reading, writing or watching the hummingbirds outside her window, she loves to take long walks by the ocean.

Related

- The Art of Not Being Governed (review) by Peter Lamborn Wilson, FE#382, Spring, 2010
- The Golden Age of the Barbarians (Excerpt from *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*) by James C. Scott, FE #399, Fall, 201

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