

Book Review

James C. Scott: *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States.*
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, 312 pages, ISBN:
9780300182910, Hardcover \$26.00.

*Michael R. Kolb**

James C. Scott's *Against the Grain* combines the virtues of being both approachable to the average reader and extremely thought-provoking even for the specialist. In it he outlines the formations of the earliest states, specifically those first ones that rose and fell in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in XXXX BCE. In this it serves as another instance of those ideas he advanced in his previous *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* in 2009.

To be blunt, Scott is not greatly devoted to nation-states whether small or large. His thesis is that historians and others focus too much on those parts of civilization past that leave intriguing artifacts and enjoy the survival of their written records and propaganda, and so fail to realize that until quite recently in humanity's course, there were no states at all. 'Despite the state's self-image and its centrality in most standard histories...for thousands of years after its first appearance, it was not a constant but a variable, and a very wobbly one at that in much of the life of humanity'.

The state-building process begins with simple sedentary communities as people settle down in environments that are fertile but extremely limited to mostly the growing of grain for sustenance. These communities abandon previous styles of foraging, shifting agriculture and nomadism that exploit richer and more diverse feeding strategies. Fire, grain plants and useful animals are domesticated, as are people themselves.

With this movement human beings began a radical restructuring of the land to serve the needs of farming. Scott raises this question: if a person spends eight hours a day tending, for instance, potatoes, which species is really serving which species' needs? Further, this entity, the *domus*, creates 'ideal "feedlots" for pathogens: domesticated, too, were microorganisms perfectly adapted to thrive on us. Agricultural monoculture of grains produces an impoverished diet and long term health challenges: the faddish western 'paleo' diet then, might actually be on to something.

Scott continues his account through the subsequent development of nation-states with the additional burdens of over-crowding, taxes, war, corvee labor, and other gifts of civilization. The chief problem of early states, he asserts, was not so much keeping the barbarians (who found cows easy game) keeping citizens in, preventing them from escaping to a healthier, easier, and freer way of life amid the stateless. Many states collapsed, he suggests, because people simply grew sick of living in them. 'With respect to population, the vast majority of people throughout this period (and arguably up to 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'.

Why would Scott's 'deep history' centred on Mesopotamia be of interest to scholars of the northeast? It seems to this reviewer that Scott challenges us to take a fresh and profoundly different look at the history of this region and even the current interactions of the modern state (and, for that matter, the previous colonial state) with those who are beyond the pale. 'Tribes are' Scott asserts 'in the first instance, an administrative fiction of the state; tribes begin where states end. The antonym for "tribe" is "peasant": that is, a state subject'.

One example of this that I am familiar with is amongst the Dimasa people. Dimasas had a state of questionable stability and power from at least 1200 CE in Dimapur, lasting until 1830. One of the better documented events was the revolt of Tularam Senapati in which the hills effectively rid

themselves of the oppressions of what had become a Hinduized, Bengalized state in Cachar. Other events such as the revolt of Jadanong can also be examined along these lines of conflict between the state and periphery. At the very least, scholars here can take note that the onset of state control in any hill area is very recent and perhaps a still tentative cooptation.

And more intriguingly, *Against the Grain* challenges us, the civilized people, to ask ourselves who might be more likely to survive and perhaps even thrive amidst the coming meteorological disasters: we of the organized states, dependent on the benefits it seems to ensure? Or is it rather the people of the hills—high, dry, adaptable and accustomed to living simply without the organization and oppression we currently enjoy?

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