trustworthy shortcut into a sprawling and multidisciplinary body of literature. The book deserves to be read and appreciated as the debate over the media impact on politics and democracy continues.

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References

James C. Scott: Against the Grain. A Deep History of the Earliest States

Although commonly acknowledged as an analytical problem that plagues the social sciences, the reach of methodological statism has never quite been fully pursued. Picking up the gauntlet, James C. Scott embarks on a daring interdisciplinary study, drawing on prehistory, archaeology, ancient history, and anthropology (p. x) so as to shed light on the earliest roots of state-building processes. Going as far back in history as 6500 BCE, Scott picks apart the rigid narrative of progress tying together crop-agriculture, sedentarism, and state formation (pp. 1–3). Throughout the book, the author skilfully employs the analytical toolkit of political sociology and political anthropology to the tricky field of prehistory, offering a set of hypotheses concerning a problematic bias—the methodological statism of archaeology qua state-sponsored research (p. 13).

Similar to some of the arguments outlined by Harari [2016: Chapters 2, 3], though more methodologically grounded, Scott’s main argument is that ‘stateness must be understood as an institutional con-
ganising (p. 66). Reviewing some of the major existing studies, the author points out that flood-retreat agriculture required far less labour, was much more widespread than previously assumed, and could offer a way out of the teleology of previous explanations (p. 66). What this suggests is that the ‘social will to sedentarism’, the staple of the progress narrative linking agriculture and state formation, should not be taken for granted at all. Rather, Scott argues that this putative ‘will’, which does appear in some early historical sources, should simply be read as the discourse of an agrarian state stigmatising populations outside its boundaries (p. 62).

Broadly speaking, Scott argues that, contrary to the conventional narrative of progress, there is no definitive, irreversible, and clearly defined line when Homo Sapiens crossed from ‘savagery’ into ‘civilization’. In this line of thought, Chapter 2 details the intricacies of moving from hunter-gatherers to sedentary communities. The key process identified is the domestication of plants and animals, which Scott sees as the move from organisms that thrive in the wild automatically towards ones that can no longer thrive without complete human attention (pp. 74–75). The starting point of the analysis is the observation that hunter-gatherer life is punctuated by bursts of intense activity over short periods of time, responding to the natural tempo of food availability (i.e. discovering new resources – p. 88). The end result of the process is radical transformation, which centralises the idea of tempo; in contrast to the reactive bursts of activity in hunter-gatherers, farmers are almost fully confined to a single food web and their routines become geared to maximising it (p. 90).

Unlike the previous sections, Chapter 3 starts from a consensus in the literature: the ‘broad spectrum revolution’, the first wave of intensification of subsistence agriculture resulting from the scarcity of big game, pushed early humans away from over-reliance on naturally available resources, towards exploiting more labour-intensive resources such as crop-agriculture (pp. 94–95). Scott’s argument is that what characterised the broad spectrum revolution was the environmental forcing of early humans to rely on crop-agriculture, a technique which they knew but used on-and-off owing to its labour-intensity and low returns (pp. 95–96). While a precise explanation for the revolution itself seems to be missing, the end result is agreed upon. Hunter-gatherers were compelled to extract more, even at a higher labour cost, from their immediate surroundings, rather than simply moving on. Quite clearly this process was a tenuous one because the early multi-species resettlement camps, while partly solving the issue of resources, brought about the immediate threat of vermin and diseases (p. 104). The survival and eventual flourishing of these communities had to do less with a ‘will to sedentarism’ and more with the simple fact that, despite high mortality rates owing to infection, early sedentary humans also had unprecedentedly high rates of reproduction (p. 113).

Was the leap from the domus to the early state an immediate consequence, as previous narratives had it, or was it more sinuous? Scott’s answer, detailed in Chapter 4, is that highlighting an exact moment as the ‘birth’ of a state is quite arbitrary and is hamstrung by the fact that few sites that offer enough archaeological evidence (p. 118). Put simply, the author argues that the Neolithic agro-complex (i.e. domus) was a necessary but not sufficient condition for state-formation (p. 117). Scott proposes a multi-layered answer to the question of how early states managed to exert enough control on land and manpower. On the one hand, geography matters—only very rich soils could sustain concentrated populations (p. 124). On the other hand, climate change was also a key factor—as rivers retreated, labour-intensive irrigation became
vital and was made possible as low water levels had the effect of concentrating populations (p. 120). Yet, even with these crucial pre-conditions satisfied, state-formation was not linear at all, constant fragmentation and decay being the norm rather than the exception (p. 122).

By contrast, while the move from the domus to the early state must be reconsidered in a less functional way, ‘it is virtually impossible to conceive of even the earliest state without a systematic technology of numerical record keeping’ (p. 140). Granted, writing seems to have been used for accounting purposes far earlier than for the civilisational role it has usually been associated with (p. 141). However, writing seems to have been inextricably linked to state-building through processes of standardisation in coinage, weight, distance, and so on (p. 145). At the same time, Scott carefully steers his narrative away from any functionalist interpretations—while the writing–state-building nexus might have been tightly interwoven, the key lesson is that, just like the early state, writing and literacy are also quite prone to fragmentation and shrinkage (p. 147). The topic of collapse is returned to in more detail in Chapter 6, with precisely this idea of shrinkage in mind. The author shows that state-collapse is simply ‘a reduction in social complexity’ rather than a critical juncture in the putative march of progress (p. 186). The collapse of the ‘brief miracles of statecraft’, which seems to have been the norm rather than the exception, is ‘less likely to mean a dissolution of culture than its reformulation and decentralization’ (p. 186).

Chapters 5 and 7 offer very interesting reconsiderations on statehood, war, and the ‘age of barbarians’. Reading between the lines there is an implicit dialogue, above and beyond the immediate literature on the prehistory of states, with Olson’s roving vs stationary bandit [2000]. For Olson the stationary bandit takes on a state-like or governmental function by protecting citizens against roving bandits [Olson 2000]. For Scott early warfare and state-building were similarly about settling a stable population close to a power core, coercing them there to produce a surplus, part of which would indeed be used to buy off security from roving, neighbouring warlords who were labelled ‘barbarians’ (p. 151). This is precisely why the author shows that ‘barbarians’ do not lack a specific culture, nor are they a ‘stage’ in the ladder from hunter-gatherers to the peak of tax-paying state citizens (p. 227). If methodological statism is deduced from the historical narrative, barbarians quite simply are a position in relation to early statehood (p. 227). Further down this line, Scott argues that warfare in Mesopotamia from around 3000 BCE to 1000 BCE was less about the conquest of territory than about the assembling of the population at the state’s grain core (p. 154).

On the whole, this book impresses with analytical clarity and a crisp writing style. Acknowledging the limitations of a political anthropologist venturing into uncharted methodological waters, Scott manages nonetheless to masterfully dissect the dominant teleological narrative. What is offered in its place is a set of plausible hypotheses that stand at the interesting junction of political science, sociology, and ancient history.

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References