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Lecture notes on James C Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*

Jacket copy is good overview: “The first states … were born of accumulations of domestications: first fire, then plants, livestock, subjects of the state, captives, and finally women in the patriarchal family – all of which can be viewed as a way of gaining control over reproduction.”

PREFACE

Scott is a non-expert synthesizing expert reports. He does however have expertise in modern state practices of control (*Seeing Like a State*) and historical state evasion (*The Art of Not Being Governed*).

Overturning the usual progress narrative: sedentism (due to wetland abundance) preceded plant and animal domestication, and both sedentism and domestication preceded agricultural villages. States appear long after fixed-field agriculture; early states were not attractive (contra SC logic); they had to capture and hold population, but that exposes them to epidemics, so they were fragile. State collapses, read by states as “dark ages,” were probably better for majority of population. States create new predation opportunities for “barbarians,” who were better off than rural peasants and certainly hard work slaves and / or urban slaves.

Domestication as control of (physical and psychological) reproduction of fire, plants, animals, slaves, subjects, and women; cereal grains as legible for taxes necessary for states.

INTRODUCTION: A NARRATIVE IN TATTERS: WHAT I DIDN’T KNOW

Against the progress narrative. Moving the Anthropocene – noticeable human impact on ecology – back to control of fire (> 400kya); then another jump with sedentism, agriculture, pastoralism; then again with the state. This is “deep history,” which allows questioning of presuppositions.

Most years of *H. sapiens* life was in nomadic, acephalic, forager bands; stratified, taxed, walled-in agricultural states only appear about 5kya (3K BCE), which is 4ky after crop domestication and sedentism. Farming as progress blessed by gods is a common state self-justifying myth.

PARADOXES OF STATE AND CIVILIZATION NARRATIVES. Sedentism is not result of fixed agriculture; it first shows up thousands of years earlier in ecologically rich and varied wetlands. You can also get crop-planting and then dispersal with only return for harvest. Also, harvest tools preceded planting, so we were living on wild plants well before agriculture. So we had long period of low-level plant food provisioning that was not fully wild, yet not fully domesticated either. So we can see long history of various domestications qua control of

reproduction of plants, animals, and humans (most intensely but not exclusively in captured slave women).

PUTTING THE STATE IN ITS PLACE. First step is to notice self-justifying state narratives are the bulk of the written evidence. Second step is to notice early states were small and fragile; and that even up until 1600 CE, 1/3 of globe was nonstate zones (non-agriculture, non-taxed). “Dark Ages” were the rule rather than the exception. State self-justification means you have to read between the lines to find flight, epidemics, slavery.

THUMBNAIL ITINERARY. Forecast of chapters.

Ch 1: Domestication. Fire in *H erectus* allowed brain growth by predigestion and hence increased calories (Wrangham thesis). Domestication allows “late-Neolithic multispecies resettlement camps.”

Ch 2: genetic angle on transitive domestication. Farming as experientially thinner than foraging. [There was also earlier self-domestication to allow egalitarian forager life.]

Ch 3: drudgery and deprivation of farming vs foraging. Epidemics in early agricultural states.

Ch 4: the “grain hypothesis” for state formation: “only grains are best suited to concentrated production, tax assessment, appropriation, cadastral surveys, storage, and rationing” (21). By contrast, tubers are “invisible” to states. So states need to eliminate that option for an alternate non-taxable diet. Legumes don’t have a determinate harvest, so they are not easily taxed. Scott’s list of “state” descriptors are “more or less”: centralization, stratification, etc (23).

Ch 5: coercion in early state formation; friction with SC narrative. Various forms of forced labor, including chattel vs debt slavery.

Ch 6: early state fragility and collapses. Three aspects: 1) epidemics; 2) deforestation and flooding; 3) salinization of soil. “Collapse” is a state-centric term; Dark Ages might have improved life for many folks.

Ch 7: states provide a great ecosystem for marginal “barbarian” life: resources for predation, trade, tribute / protection payment. However, barbarians dug their own grave by enslaving some of their own neighbors for sale to states and by enlisting as mercenaries in state armies.

CHAPTER 1: FOUR DOMESTICATIONS

FIRE: at least 400kya; hence, before H sapiens. Fire is our “trump card.” It is “slow-motion landscape evolution” resulting in resource concentration. 39 It is niche construction. Cooking food changed our bodies: bio-cultural evolution. 40-42. Wrangham.

CONCENTRATION AND SEDENTISM: A WETLANDS THESIS: sedentism predates domestication of grains and livestock, and can persist w/o cultivation of cereals. In turn, domesticated grains and livestock precede agrarian states. 46

WETLANDS AND SEDENTISM: first sedentism needed drainage rather than irrigation; first occurred in wetlands as foragers could tap several food webs. 49 By shifting from one web to another they could have diversity w/o nomadism; in a sense, they could wait and have the food come to them by migrations, tides, floods, etc. 52 This same diversity prevents states which need to have ppl dependent on a visible crop they can tax and control. These multiple webs are lower on food chains 50. Also, water transport is much more efficient than land transport. 54

WHY IGNORED? States see swamps as anti-civilization, as raw material to drained to be transformed into grain fields; hence, the swamp origin of settlement was ignored. 56 States want to separate mud into water and soil. 57. As common pool resources, wetlands resisted state control.

MINDING THE GAP: There was a 4000-year gap between sedentism and mixed economies and agricultural states. 58. We should assume these "sedentary foragers" were rational actors pursuing their immediate interests. 59. Macroclimate changes may have contributed to "pulses" of concentration and dispersal 60.

WHY PLANT AT ALL? Assumptions of greater reliability of resources and ease of storage don't hold up to scrutiny. 61. For "sedentary foragers" the land itself was a huge resource base with its own storage capacity. 65 Nor can the delayed gratification of agriculture be seen as an advance over imprudent immediate gratification foragers: they had elaborate planning for their resource procurement. 65. What might have been first farming was flood-retreat agriculture: avoids all sorts of work by letting the water reshape the land – as fire did earlier. 67.

CHAPTER 2: LANDSCAPING THE WORLD: THE DOMUS COMPLEX

The "domus" is an assemblage, or concatenation of multiple species and environmental features – landscape changes, animal pens, houses, butcher shops, blacksmiths, marketplaces and so on – that are put together in varying proportions. It is multi-dimensional long-term inherited niche construction 70.

So, can we see a domestication of humans over time? 79 Scott only alludes briefly to the Human Self-Domestication hypothesis which discusses top-down anger-control and bottom-up reduction in reactivity as processes allowing pre-state egalitarian / acephalic forager band life. Hallmarks here are reduction in sexual dimorphism (especially of canine teeth). Scott does imply an acceleration of that process with the domus assemblage, which is plausible. 83-84. He also mentions the creation of a bimodal fossil record with a small group resembling prestate foragers and a larger group of workers with nutritional / growth problems 84; 107-109.

He misses the possibility of bio-cultural evolution in the Developmental Systems Theory mode. 86. That is, even if you don't go full inherited epigenetic changes, as long as you have roughly convergent child-rearing practices you can produce more-or-less docility vs aggression depending on the class you're born into: you can make a high percentage of boys into soldiers / warriors by their upbringing – it will never be 100% of course but you can do it.

Over time, you can see a vast reduction in the dimensionality of life = increasing "discipline": 1) foragers have to be acquainted with the behavior and rhythms of many, many species and food webs as they intersect the seasonal rhythms and local weather of their area 89. 2) Farming is the intentional reduction of those dimensions to much fewer: a cereal crop, plus some domesticated animals 90. (Domesticating animals is making them helpless prey: it's working ahead of time to breed docility and confine space for the animals) to turn what was complex hunting into easy slaughter). Hence, there is a big reduction in rhythms to a fairly simple one of plowing, planting, tending, and harvesting. In a sense, we become dependent on our creations, the domesticates 87. 3) These reduced dimensions can be further routinized or "deskilled" in slave labor practices. The assembly line – whether in an industrial revolution factory or in a large routinized slave plantation – is a further reduction in dimensions. 87-92.

CHAPTER 3: ZOONOSES: A PERFECT EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STORM

Agro-pastoralism appears before states. But why would foragers start farming?

A common explanation is they were forced to do so by 1500-year cold spell @12-10kya (94). This fits the standard narrative of a "broad spectrum revolution" where cultivation allows access to lower food chain resources after high-food-chain large fauna are hunted to extinction or at least rarity. So, you get bad climate, increased population, and reduction in easy-to-reach high food chain fauna as multiple factors driving farming. 95 Scott produces evidence against this 95. Doesn't seem to be population pressure, and after the cold spell the warmer and wetter climate would have sparked diversity of resources again.

Once you get intensive agriculture about 4K years later, then you get population, territorial circumscription, and resource diversity reduction from lack of big game. 95. So there's no Whig progress narrative here; in fact, having agriculture and domesticated animals as the main source – as opposed to part of a wider picture – was avoided as long as possible. Also, much agricultural work is about keeping the food chain centered on human – weeds and vermin have to be eliminated to make the land production focused on what we want to eat, not what other species want. Here we see reduction of dimensions = disciplining the land. 96

The domus is fragile due to density-dependent diseases that the domus itself allows to flourish. When you bring together multiple species of plants and animals, you also bring together the insect, pests, vermin, and micro-organisms they carry with them. 111. So a lot of farming work is protecting crops from these dangers that farming itself produces.

The domus is fragile because of a reduction in food sources; it also requires constant inputs from the "nature" it tries to keep outside. 112.

But the domus allows for a huge spike in reproduction that outweighs the increased death costs. 113. Compare forager population control – delayed weaning, abortion, infanticide, high-exercise lives with low body fat and high protein diets delay menarche and can make menstruation irregular. 114. For foragers, a child is a mouth to feed for many years. But for farmers, a child is a labor source. So female reproduction becomes an important economic factor to be discipline. 114

Three population aspects: 1) farmers outbred foragers; foragers became farmers by "choice or force"; 3) domus diseases became endemic to farmers but were epidemic to "immunologically naïve" foragers.

CHAPTER 4: AGRO-ECOLOGY OF THE EARLY STATE

The domus assemblage – agriculture, domestic animals, towns, specialized work – becomes the target for the niche-construction of elites (122); that is, it is captured so they can appropriate the surplus that is produced; you could even say they are parasites (117).

You can have agriculture, sedentism, towns w/o states, but you can't have states with mono-culture of grains. That's because for Scott one of the main characteristics of states is taxation, and non-grain food production is much harder to be effectively taxed (118).

Among the criteria for recognizing states: taxation, including the special apparatus of collectors, assessors, accountants; work gangs for agriculture and / or monumental architecture; scribes and their record-keeping apparatus; military specialists; standardized weights and measures.

How did the state get off the ground? Drought might have packed people together and diminished resource diversity (120-22).

The domus was already insecure; adding state parasitism on top of it only increased the strain through 1) taxation scooping into the surplus and hence pushing farmers to the edge of survival; 2) frequent warfare, which further exposed farming surplus to further appropriation either through heightened war taxation or plunder by invading armies. (You could say taxation is a sort of rationalized, regularized plunder by rulers of a domesticated population – compare the replacement of hunting by slaughter of domesticated animals [146].)

AGRO-GEOGRAPHY OF STATEMAKING: you need fertile soils (irrigation or flood plains); water for transport of "wild frontier" raw materials traded for with "barbarians" (125). Hence hills, deserts, swamps are not good state zones (126-27).

GRAINS MAKE STATES: cereal grains are necessary (but not sufficient) for states in that they are "legible" for taxation (129-31). Commerce is harder to tax (131) because of irregular rhythms. But cereals have a definite calendar (132). Again, geography not amenable to grains were the frontier zones of states; it cost more to control them than you could gain in taxes (135). "Nongrain" people used mobility and an "illegible" and diverse resource base to avoid state control but benefitted from trade with states (135).

WALLS MAKE STATES: PROTECTION AND CONFINEMENT. Here is the state as protection racket: once warfare becomes common, states can offer a social contract: in exchange for taxes, they offer protection via their army from other state armies. But they need to keep their tax base under control, so that's also one function of walls (137-38).

WRITING MAKES STATES: RECORD KEEPING AND LEGIBILITY: 1) shift from oral recording of kinship to written recording of subjecthood; 2) shift from foraging to "legible" forms of work in specialized artisanship (140). Literature or writing to represent mythic speech arrives much later than state administrative / commercial record-keeping (141; 145).

Along the lines of disciplining qua reduction of multiplicity dimensions, we see abstraction from concrete and idiosyncratic local exchange to allow standardized state-wide measures (144). Writing thus "destroys distance" in reducing diversity of local measures (144).

Another example of discipline, this time of female reproductive capacity shows up in early state biopolitics – not just preventing flight, but using taxation for pro-natalist policies (147).

CHAPTER 5: POPULATION CONTROL: BONDAGE AND WAR

Population control via territorial control was essential to early states; compare the Spanish *reducciones* or settlement camps in the New World (151). Such control is necessary in order for elites to appropriate surplus, which is otherwise produced and consumed by foragers in their commons-based system (152). Peasants by contrast have to be coerced; this can be directly (enslavement, corvée labor, debt bondage, etc) (152) or later by simple control of land with a dense population so that independent access to the land is impossible (153). Thus another prime requirement is stopping flight, or regular war to replace lost population by enslavement, by slave purchase from "barbarians," or forced resettlement of populations brought from a conquered territory elsewhere (153).

THE STATE AND SLAVERY: states did not invent slavery, which existed in chiefdoms, but it did ramp it up significantly (155). The classical world of Greece and Rome were slave states (156).

SLAVERY AND BONDAGE IN MESOPOTAMIA: usual story is that slavery was small part of overall economy; Scott demurs from this. Although not as central as in Greece and Rome, it was important for 1) textiles, the most important trade item; 2) labor for big infrastructure projects; 3) token and reward for elite status (157). Besides, if you widen the scope of inquiry beyond

strict chattel slavery to include other forms of coerced labor (debt bondage, corvée labor, forced resettlement) you can see the importance of unfree work (158).

POWs were source of slaves; wars as slave raids as much as territorial enhancement (population control on the land you did already control was as important as expanding territory, which just increases the need for population control) (158-59). State-run workshops for textiles had slaves, debtors, indigent, etc (159). Slaves were categorized along with domesticated animals (160). Some slave houses loaned out expert workers (160). Slave populations didn't reproduce due to bad treatment; hence need for more slave wars (161). Bounty hunters and punishment of those who helped runaway slaves (162). Utopia as freedom from normal slave conditions (164).

EGYPT AND CHINA: the point here I think is to show the "abstract machine" of the state and its need for population requires difference and repetition of the mechanisms of slavery, debt bondage, corvée labor, slave raiding, and so on (164-66).

SLAVERY AS "HUMAN RESOURCES" STRATEGY: slave capture means a state can acquire productive years of a human, with the cost of raising them – and developing their skills – borne by other regimes (167). Enslavement with transport is also deracination and atomization, so you get individual slaves versus a whole social assemblage of violence aimed at their control (167). This has to be balanced against desire for a lot of highly productive adult male slaves; if they have ethnic ties, common language, memory of freedom, etc, then the possibility of revolt increases (168). So there is often a preference for women and children as slave captives; there is also assimilation and manumission if racialization isn't part of the picture (168). Women also provide reproduction of slave population (169). Slavery helps social stratification: you're always replenishing the bottom stratum, plus you can give slaves to elites as rewards (170). Adult male slaves did the worst necessary labor – mining, quarrying, timber harvesting, slave rowing – as well as menial / low industrial work – charcoal making, canal digging, etc. Using foreign slaves spared the local workers from the worst exploitation and headed off their insurrection (170).

BOOTY CAPITALISM AND STATE BUILDING: more on slave capture and alleviating pressure on native workers (173).

THE PARTICULARITY OF MESOPOTAMIAN SLAVERY AND BONDAGE: reasons why Mesopotamian slavery isn't as evident as Greek and Roman slavery (174). Small size, close to home capture, quick assimilation. POWs might have just become subjects rather than outright slaves; comparison with Athenian *metics* (175-76). Other forms of bondage: 1) mass deportation and forced resettlement (177); 2) subjugation of a portion of the local population, on the model of the Spartan *helot* (178-79). So there are forms of coerced labor that don't fit the chattel slavery model that might have been at work (179).

A SPECULATIVE NOTE ON DOMESTICATION, DRUDGERY, AND SLAVERY: state did not invent slavery, but it did institute the first form of a coerced labor society. Back to the theme of domestication as control of reproduction (both social structure and psycho-biological, that is

reduction of enslaved people to “human tools”) (180-82). Capture of female reproductive capacity by patriarchal farmers fits here too (181).

CHAPTER 6: FRAGILITY OF THE EARLY STATE: COLLAPSE AS DISASSEMBLY.

The domus was fragile, so the parasitic state shared its fragility, and in fact increased it via reduction of dimensions of the multiplicity, which increased production while sacrificing resilience. Collapse = loss of complexity = return to local control of villages which had been incorporated into state (185). Such central collapse did not necessarily mean lower quality of life in the components (186).

Reflection on the state-centeredness of the “heroic period of archaeology,” which can be seen as imperial Euro-American search for cultural trophies for metropolitan museums (186).

Modularity of components and fragility of emergent central control, which falls apart at certain thresholds of relations of multiplicity processes (187-88). Structural vulnerabilities, no matter how competent the rulers were (189): reliance on single annual crop harvest meant exposure to pests, droughts, crop failure, and animal epidemics.

EARLY STATE MORBIDITY: ACUTE AND CHRONIC. Looking at systemic problems might be missed by chronological historical focus.

Disease: recap of the epidemiological fragility theme.

Ecocide: Deforestation and Salinization. If you cut timber upstream (which you need to do for ease of transport), then you risk mudslides and floods, which silt up the river. You might also risk malaria when you clear land you get standing water, which allows mosquito breeding (200). You also provoke salinization and / or soil exhaustion (200-01).

Politicide: Wars and Exploitation of the Core. Grain-population assemblage requires manpower to produce but also to defend / replace population by wars led by conscripts and / or military specialists, putting more pressure on remaining primary producers and hence increasing their desire to flee, which in turn requires more surveillance by non-producers, and so on (203). You can also get civil wars in addition to foreign invasion: what’s at stake is the power to appropriate the surplus (204).

Dependence on the water-close core also brings fragility: 1) variation in quality / extent of surplus might tempt rulers to increased core exploitation, but that risks exhaustion / flight / revolt of subjects. 2) states didn’t have good quality knowledge of its productivity so it could over- or under-shoot its exploitation targets in a crisis (206-07).

Praising Collapse. Reclaiming "Dark Ages" as periods of disassembly of states, which might have led to gains in quality of life for subjugated peoples able to disperse and flee coerced labor, onerous taxation, epidemic-laden crowding, conscription into armies, and so on.

CHAPTER 7: THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BARBARIAN

Barbarians are symbionts with states (as opposed to pre-state foragers, aka "savages" in the old progress typology of Morgan and 19th C anthropology). Captive state populations increase the quality of barbarian prey targets (222-23; 237). Contrast this quick, acute raiding with the rationalized raiding that is state taxation (223; 238).
More importantly, however, states were trading partners for barbarians (226). Raw material (e.g. timber), exotic goods (spices), as well as cattle and slaves were traded for textiles, jewelry, grain, pottery, etc.

Barbarian geography is all about "friction of terrain" as Scott says in Art of Not Being Governed. State armies were infantry / cavalry, so getting into forests and hills frustrated state control attempts (228).

State / barbarian borders were two-way membranes, not one-way as SC narrative would have it (231). 1) populations could shift modes of production from farming / herding mixes to foraging and back again; 2) state formation produced refugees; 3) established states always had flight issues (as well as high mortality), such that slave raids and forced resettlement were necessary.

So many barbarians were ex-state subjects heading back to foraging or "secondary primitivism" as Clastres calls it (232). Upland zones are "shatter zones" of population / cultural mixing (232). Barbarian "tribes" are state administrative fictions; from their perspective they are loose temporary assemblages of disparate nonstate peoples (235).

Insofar as it often resulted in improved quality of life, the "rational" move – contra the SC – was for many to flee the state (234).

Raiding has to be kept in check to avoid resource depletion, so smart barbarians can shift to tribute qua protection racket, thus mimicking the state (240-43). So barbarians and states are competing for ability to extract surplus from captive primary production populations (243).

Barbarian control of trade routes enabled them to trade with states, and also to extort "taxation" of state-traders via "tolls" to allow passage, and / or piracy as predation on state trading.

States and barbarians are symbionts or "dark twins" which sometimes produced a sort of shared sovereignty (or sharing of appropriated surplus) but their relation could break down (249-50). 1) Barbarians could conquer the state and become new ruling class (250). 2) barbarians could become mercenaries of state armies (251).

Golden Age of barbarians lasted a long time, but enslavement of other barbarians and sale of military service ultimately tipped the scales in favor of states, which now dominate the globe to a much greater extent than ever before (255-56).

JP: Scott doesn't explore it here but you can trace contemporary state domination in *Seeing Like a State* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*: despite failures of central planning, more modest [biopolitical / neoliberal] administration can keep internal population management going very nicely in the core [going off the grid and / or creating police no-go zones* in slums notwithstanding], while good old-fashioned brutality with automatic weapons, helicopters, and GPS can keep peripheral peasantry in line, and keep nonstate people confined to margins and / or ineffective in resisting resource extraction when desired.

*actually, as far as I can tell, what you see in so-called "no-go zones" is a sort of "shared sovereignty" between nonstate actors (in Scott's terms, "barbarian" gangs) and state police forces, who arrive in force when they want to and shoot first / ask questions later.