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Still Waiting for the Barbarians

Adam T. Smith

> I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid on them.
>
> J. M. Coetzee (1982)

It seems almost preordained that James Scott, a scholar who moves with profound agility between the worlds of anthropology and political science, should eventually work his way onto the intellectual terrain of the barbarian. Barbarians play a foundational role in the formation of both disciplines, populating both anthropology's 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2003) and political science's prelapsarian 'state of nature' (Palmeri 2016). In Scott's most recent book, *Against the Grain*, the barbarians who helped to shape the world's earliest states play a variety of consequential roles. They are at once the forces of resistance to centralizing power, the refugees seeking respite from sovereignty's infringements and the brigands of the borderlands who provide the slave labour and mercenaries that prop up the fragile state.

For those familiar with Scott's earlier work, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, the barbarians in *Against the Grain* bear a striking resemblance to Zomia's 'barbarians by design' (Scott 2009), denizens of borderlands forged by the twinned processes of 'state evasion' and 'state prevention'. Scott's excursion to antiquity anchors his analysis of ungoverned spaces in a deep past where it productively upends the long-standing historical assumption that the rise of civilization was met by a global chorus of cheers. However, in reshaping our understanding of the perils of state making, *Against the Grain* also argues for a consequential rethinking of those outside the early state's reach, the barbarians, a revisionist project that warrants closer scrutiny.

Scott uses the term 'barbarian' as a cheeky shorthand for any individual external to the demands of the state. The Classical tradition, which bequeathed us the term, also defined the barbarian as a political category, a moral and aesthetic antipode to the citizen, an ignoble and rude 'slave by nature', fit only to be ruled (Aristotle *Politics* 1252b). And yet alongside the contemptible barbarian lay its double, a romantic figure panegyrized in a primitivist tradition that stretches from Homer to Tacitus and eventually to Herder and Nietzsche. These barbarians are noble innocents, brave, 'blameless' (*Iliad* 1.423), 'the most righteous of men' (*Iliad* 13.6). They are tragic figures, bygone authentic humans whose 'nature was still natural' (Nietzsche 1989, 201), unburdened by the renunciation of instincts demanded by civilization (Freud 1969, 66).

Barbarians, as the original citizens of the state of nature, have thus long been understood as the point of origin for political order, driving a civilizing process that elevates us from the originary *bellum omnia contra omnes* of the primordial horde (i.e. Hobbes) even as it alienates the species from our natural humanity (i.e. Rousseau). What the barbarians of Classical and Modern thought share is their formation within an ethnographic image of the Other, from Herodotian observations of Scythians to colonial encounters in the New World. They have thus traditionally been understood as primitive forms destined to be exiled by the logics of inexorable expansion native to the state and civilization.

Archaeology has already done considerable work to undermine the place of the barbarian in the apostolic ordering of social evolution, and indeed much of that effort

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provides the empirical foundation for Scott's analysis. As the researches of Cribb (1991), Di Cosmo (2002), Fleming (2004), Porter (2011) and others have made abundantly clear, nomads, a generalized ethnographic form of the barbarian, were critical elements not just outside archaic states, but within them as well. Scott's barbarians, in contrast, are largely conceived of as occupants of zones exterior to the emergent territories of early agro-states. Hence his model defines a bipolar model of ancient geopolitics (p. 35).

In this sense, Scott's image of the barbarian harkens back to Aristotle's division of the world into Hellenes and barbarians. And like Aristotle, Scott considers the barbarian to be a political category, defined by its status as external to the polity (p. 33). As an analytic device there is much to recommend this heuristic, at least in the context of Bronze and Iron Age Eurasia. Early polities regularly forwarded similar geographic imaginaries, from the pairing of Gilgamesh and the ur-barbarian, Enkidu, to the propaganda of the Greco-Persian wars, to the 'raw' peoples of China's peripheries (p. 134). In addition, there is some evidence of egalitarian communities forming in opposition to the depredations of state power (Smith 2015). Most notably, there is considerable conceptual utility in bringing the 'barbarian zone' (p. 33) into the study of the early state rather than exiling it to the periphery. Scott's dualistic model is considerably richer than earlier efforts to think systemically about cores and peripheries in that the political economy of emergent metropoles clearly depends on the mutual exploitation of states and barbarians. In Scott's account, emerging urban centres are lashed to the peoples of their 'penumbra' not only by resource flows necessary to the state (e.g. labour and raw materials), but also by practices at the heart of barbarian socio-economic orders (e.g. trading and raiding).

Yet, despite their conceptual co-constitution, the categories of state and barbarian are not accorded complementary conceptual depth. Stateness, Scott argues (p. 23), describes an institutional continuum and, although we see a relatively narrow array of extreme forms in his primary examples, the term is clearly capacious in its ability to capture Ur, Harrapa, Teotihuacan and the modern nation-state all under its ample conceptual frame. The barbarian, in contrast, is established as a negation, 'a position vis-à-vis a state or empire' (p. 227), rather than as an anthropological form of its own. It is 'an ironic shorthand for "non-state peoples"' (p. 222) and, as a result, the content of the political category 'barbarian' is defined only by absence, not by a counter-politics. The 'freedom' of the Barbarian Golden Age is solely a freedom *from*: from taxation, conscription, epidemic and the drudgery of farming. There are no political commitments that ground a freedom *to*. There are thus real limits to the conceptual utility of using a caricature of barbarians in place of a more robust account of the diversity of peoples whose political commitments were not defined by the state. Indeed, the category is held together instead by a set of economic practices that invert those of the state: mobility to allow participation in multiple food webs, diverse subsistence practices to mitigate risk, and the accumulation of wealth in forms less amenable to taxation.

Constraining barbarian economies to a mirror of the state results in lending a regrettable sameness to communities that were supposed to be defined by diversity. As a result, all non-state societies start to look a lot like the handful of canonical examples of mobile pastoralists that have long pre-occupied the Western imagination: Scythians, Mongols, Huns, etc. Empirically, this compression is difficult to justify, as it threatens to throws us back onto a Herodotian caricature of barbarian societies. Nevertheless, conceptually Scott's barbarian economics are tied into an intriguing historical narrative of community formation.

Scott links the rise of the barbarian to two interlinked processes, the disgorging of refugees fleeing the state into 'shatter zones' (see Scott 2009, 24) that allowed for 'secondary primitivism' or 'going over to the barbarians' (p. 232). These same populations were then subsequently re-engaged by the emergent state as suppliers of critical resources (cf. Khatchadourian 2016). The history of the barbarian, for Scott, is thus the history of the state. We hear very little of the communities that would have absorbed those fleeing the state. Yet these barbarians by tradition, rather than by design, would have represented a far larger and more significant stratum of the social order than refugees. These pre-existing communities with traditions both before and beyond the state are thus inadvertently reduced to 'peoples without histories', to use Wolf's (1982) classic phrase. In the same way, the landscapes of the barbarians are defined *a priori* as places 'unsuitable for the state', 'illegible and trackless' (p. 228), rather than as landscapes by and for a wide variety of different barbarian communities. Barbarian zones are 'connective tissue' (p. 248) between states, rather than vital organs of their own. Hence, barbarians are located within both a time and a space that is not their own. So who exactly were Scott's barbarians?

In both the Classical and modern imagination, barbarians are in large measure defined by their mobility; they are 'two-footed beasts, seemingly chained to their horses from which they take their meat and drink, never touching a plough and having no houses' (Legg 1971, 52). For Scott, barbarian mobility fostered the two practices fundamental to interaction with the state: raiding and trading. Raiding provided barbarians with a ready supply of captives who were traded to the state as slaves to fill an ever-expanding labour market. Echoing Deleuze and Guattari's nomadic 'war machine' (1986), Scott's barbarians also rented themselves out to the king as a mercenary force, which made possible the deployment of violence both within the state, as a paramilitary police force and, in surrounding territories, as auxiliary divisions within the military. But even as barbarian movements cut paths of destruction and violence, raiding was in service to a larger economic strategy of resource reallocation that relied on establishing and securing trade routes across the interstitial space of the barbarian zone (p. 244). Raiding thus fed trading.

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As Scott notes, agrarian states had very similar economic strategies. In ancient states from the Assyrians to the Aztecs, 'campaigning' was an indispensable annual rite of kingship. At times, these campaigns rose to the level of wars of conquest as new territories were folded into empire and recalcitrant old ones reconquered. But more often campaigns were simply well-organized raids whose target was not territory, but commodities: livestock, grain, preciosities and, indeed, human slaves. Raids were so fundamental to the early state that they were a central preoccupation of royal art and annals. Thus, raiding cannot be pushed solely onto the predatory figure of the barbarian.

Mobility is central to Scott's imagination of the barbarian, not simply because of what it allowed them to do —raid and trade—but also what it allowed them to not do: farm. Like others before him, Scott assumes that an economy of raiding and trading exempted barbarians from the dreary obligations of agrarian labour. However, this barbarian 'Golden Age' is defined by a negative freedom to do less subsistence work, not the positive freedom to engage in another kind of political project. Hence there is a real danger that Scott's barbarians could be reduced to a simple moral inversion of civilization's traditional representation of the 'indolent savage' (Rousseau 1992, 99). Welcome as that may be, inversion does not form a particularly strong critical lens, since it remains grounded in the neoclassical assumption that the quality of life is better when we spend less time working to feed ourselves. We should instead ask: what were barbarians freer to do? If the answer is simply more raiding, a perilous practice that entailed substantial risk of injury and death, the barbarian might well have wished for a plot of land and the drudgery of the fields.

The "'Golden Age of the Barbarian' was brought to a close, in Scott's account, not by the extension of state power into new territories, but by the actions of the barbarians themselves. Their predations on one another swelled the labour reserves of the state core and their cooptation as mercenaries staved off insurrection and invasion. Scott's barbarians thus bear a double moral burden. They retain their traditional role as predatory forces, the primary threat to state expansion, but they must now also bear responsibility for the global conquest of the state, aiding and abetting the foundational violence of sovereignty.

Scott's analysis thus recalls the concluding lines of C. P. Cavafy's 1975 poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians':

> … there are no barbarians any longer
> Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> Those people were a kind of solution.

The figure of the barbarian, Scott's analysis makes clear, remains a powerful analytical and political solution. His challenging and provocative inversion of the traditional tropes of barbarity offers one potential pathway for rehabilitating an historical figure long trapped between moral condemnation and romantic elevation. Instead, Scott describes the barbarian as a powerful economic formation and a complex historical force. But enveloping them within the critique of the state also solves a conceptual problem that has plagued theorists of human freedom since Rousseau: why do we not see evidence of rebellions against the steady encroachments of state power? Why is the archaeology of the early state so silent on resistance to the ambitions of sovereignty? The solution for Scott is the useful barbarian who forestalls revolution, hunts down runaway slaves and feeds the state's insatiable thirst for labour.

However, as J.M. Coetzee anticipated in his masterpiece, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1982), to lay 'the history of empire' on the barbarian is to overlook the paradox of civilization. In Coetzee's story, the magistrate of a small town on the frontier of an unnamed empire uncovers the secret of the state's long relationship with barbarians on their margins: the barbarians are us. They are projections of the 'crime that is latent in us' (Coetzee 1999, 143); their violence, indecency, and cruelty are not inversions of civilization, its opposite, or even its evolutionary twin. The barbarian is instead a projection of civilization's originary violence onto the Other. The dichotomy of state-barbarian thus does not describe an historical dialectic for Coetzee, but rather a contradiction at the heart of civilization between ideals of political practice that are upheld by an apparatus of brutality and exploitation.

What is most impressive about *Against the Grain* is its provocation, its welcome effort to subvert, upend and challenge ways of thinking that have become, forgive the pun, too in*grained*. As such, it is quite clearly part of the larger intellectual project that Scott has pursued across a stunning disciplinary and historical terrain, from the archaeology of the ancient world (in the present volume), to the history of the early modern state (*Seeing Like a State*, 1998), to an ethnography of state evasion (*The Art of Not Being Governed*, 2009). Taken together, these studies represent an extraordinarily ambitious rethinking of the state that archaeology must take account of both empirically and conceptually.

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Going Against Whose Grain? Archaeological Theory and Southeast Asia's Premodern States

Miriam T. Stark

Southeast Asia is a paradox to Western scholars. Few are familiar with its history, yet Southeast Asia has been a veritable intellectual resource extraction zone for twentieth- and twenty-first-century social thought: imagined communities, galactic polities, agricultural involution and the moral economy of peasants all emanate from work done in Southeast Asia. The region's archaeological record is equally paradoxical: late Pleistocene 'Hobbit' hominins disrupt models of human origins, the world's largest Buddhist monument of Borobudur now sits in a wholly Muslim land mass in central Java, and the world's largest premodern city of Angkor is located in Cambodia, a country that remains resolutely rural. So we should not be surprised that Scott's *Against the Grain: A deep history of the earliest states* draws from a career in Southeast Asian studies to study human history (the entire Anthropocene). This essay concentrates on how Scott believes early Mesopotamian states became legible.

Scott's engaging book will please the educated non-archaeological public and rile archaeologists who dislike treatments of our field by those outside it. Certainly some of Scott's key points are conventional wisdom in our field, like the reciprocal nature of plant and animal domestication (e.g. Rindos 1984) and the short lifespans of ancient states (e.g. Baines & Yoffee 1998; Yoffee & Cowgill 1988). And few working archaeologists are environmental determinists *vis-à-vis* collapse: most agree that human agency shaped a world of climatic 'predictable unpredictability' (Miller 2011). Yet much of Scott's model is generalizable to premodern Southeast Asian states. One contribution from his work concerns literacy as a 'technology of communication' (p. 148; see also Scott 1999; 2010). Southeast Asian states emerged soon after the embrace of Sanskrit-derived writing systems. The role of tax *versus* tribute is currently under discussion, and libraries that Chinese annals describe have not been found, perhaps because they held records written on bamboo. Remaining stone inscriptions, however, fit Scott's model: writing made Southeast Asian states legible and elites into kings.

A second contribution lies in Scott's vision of ancient states as brittle structures that were prone to shatter. He is at least as interested in continuities in rural agrarian life through time as he is in particular 'collapse' events (a term he dismisses as 'histrionic', p. 201) of the small elite and urban sector of the population. Elites formed delicate superstructures that rested precariously atop foundations of 'smaller and more stable components' (pp. 187, 253),

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