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On Inclusions and Exclusions

Stephanie Wynne-Jones

Against the Grain is an approachable book that explores the world of the earliest states, found in Mesopotamia. It is framed by the rationale that a study of the state's deep history might give us insight into contemporary concerns via an understanding of the deep causal links between sedentism, agriculture and state control.

The volume throws up many issues, but here I would like to focus on concerns of inclusion and exclusion and the logics that underpin these. The aims of *Against the Grain* inevitably create a limited view of state power in the past, because the starting premise requires a search for attributes that can be compared with the modern state. The collection of taxes emerges as a 'hallmark of the state' (p. 14), backed by occasional references to capitalist accumulation (e.g. p. 152). This reading back of modern concepts into the past has been criticized more ably

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elsewhere and is not here my central concern (Graeber & Wengrow 2018). Instead, I begin with a more general discussion of the clear contribution that this work makes. Like Scott, I must confess that I am not expert in all the worlds it covers. My research is into the African past, a continent that does not feature in this discussion. This omission is discussed below, as part of a consideration of inclusion and exclusion. This concerns geography, but also time, because the earliest states are consistently seen as the most relevant to 'our' origins; this assumption holds a special relevance from an Africanist perspective.

Against the Grain is an impressive book, a 'big picture' discussion of the kind that archaeologists often find difficult to write. The introduction outlines the aims of the book, drawing the two axes along which it proceeds: the ways that sedentary life is structured and constrained by the demands of food production, and the ways that state power was first extended over such domesticated persons. Both of these are discussed as precursors or origin points for modern forms of state control and also for the rampant anthropogenic shaping of the contemporary globe. The functions of the state are also hinted at by this introduction, with an equation created between the collection of taxes and state control. By extension, grain agriculture, which is easily taxed, becomes a prerequisite of state power (p. 21). The whole introduction is set up against the 'standard narrative' that sees states as having driven agricultural intensification, and makes an argument for the reverse.

The book then goes on to discuss the transition to food production as a slow and halting process, based on the intensification of wild resources over many centuries (chapter 2). This is a summary of recent research, painting a vivid picture of life between 10,000 and 5000 BC, particularly in Mesopotamia. Chapter 3 goes on to explore the nature of domestication, outlining the implications for plants, animals, humans and a host of hangers-on in what Scott refers to as 'Neolithic multi-species resettlement camps'. The point here is to demonstrate that the entire landscape, animal, human and epidemiological, was affected by the transition to food production and the narrowing of options and territories that this entailed. Chapter 3 finishes with humans as victims of their own manipulations, tied by domestication into an annual round of production on a limited parcel of land, and dependent on a narrowing set of foodstuffs. This sets the stage for the entrance of the state in chapter 4, as these domesticated humans are subdued and taxed by a growing number of city states which enslave, coerce and compel their subjects into creating a surplus beyond their requirements so as to satisfy the needs of the state.

For a book about the origins of the state, the actual process by which this occurs remains surprisingly vague. The state itself is attributed agency, as well as significant self-awareness, as discussion revolves around state priorities for self-preservation. Here is also a discussion that comes closest to definition, as the needs of the state (walls, taxes, population) are explained and compared with archaeological evidence. This is a definition based on a specific place and time, although the discussion of the motivations can be insightful. Chapter 5 explores aspects of control, particularly bondage and warfare and their role in perpetuating the state machine. What this does is interesting, summarizing current research and exploring the exploitative nature of the early state, leading neatly to the discussion in chapter 6 about the fragility of state structures. This chapter, and the following one that focuses on 'barbarians' beyond the walls of the town/state, were for me some of the most interesting parts of the book, challenging some of the ways that archaeologists conceive of collapse and exploring the limits of state power. These were also the chapters that ranged most widely through time and space, pulling in comparative evidence from across the Eurasian past. The barbarians are seen in long-term perspective, ultimately doomed by their very success at interacting with the state from outside, which leads toward the dominance of state structures over the long term.

The book ends here, with no concluding discussion, which feels like a shame after such a romp through time and space. It leaves the reader, with the barbarians, staring into a future in which 'the state' comes to dominate, but without returning to the discussion of why and how. Crucially, it also leaves us without a sense of what this interesting discussion of states with walls, grain and barbarians at the gates should teach us about our global present.

What did we learn from this deep historical project? For this, perhaps, we need to return to the introduction. The choice of Mesopotamian states is justified by their status as the earliest pristine states. Scott does not say, although we might infer, that there is therefore something essential that can be learned about the nature of the state from this earliest instance, stripped of the complexities of history and interaction that characterize all later state structures. In this, Scott follows in a venerable tradition of archaeologists and consumers of archaeology, one which haunts Africanist research on states and urbanism, which came 'late' to the global party. All of Africa's state-level developments are excluded, not for being deficient in the criteria (although we will return to this), but for being secondary.

Why do we care? The reasoning here is both explicit and implicit. A line is drawn—explicitly in the introduction and also by convention—between these states and 'us'. This line follows a Childean direction, from Mesopotamia through Greece and Rome to the later states of Europe and America. To understand 'our' current situation, 'we' need a detailed history of 'our' deeper past. A vast swathe of human history is left out of this developmental trajectory. Scott acknowledges this in his recognition that 'most of the world' is found beyond the earliest grain economies, which in the eyes of Scott's tax collector is 'fiscally sterile' (p. 135). From an Africanist perspective this resonates with the 'circle of we', discussed in masterful fashion in the introduction to a recent summary of African archaeology (Stahl 2005), which also exhorts us to pay attention to the effects of those inclusions and exclusions.

In the African archaeological record we might have found other challenges to the 'standard narrative'. The Neolithic revolution took a fundamentally different character on the African continent, with pastoralist adaptations

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preceding settled agriculture by some 6000 years (Marshall & Hildebrand 2002). Pastoralist economies laid the basis for several of Africa's earlier state developments, in the west African Sahel (MacDonald 1998) and in southern Africa (Pikirayi 2001; Sinclair 1987). Africanist archaeologists do not often use the same terminology of states and territory, but they have catalogued a series of complex polities based on multiple economic systems, including the 'yam states' that Scott often denies (p. 21). In the Inland Niger Delta, archaeology has recovered a unique urban configuration occupied over 1500 years from *c.* the first century BC to AD 1400. The 'Jenne-jeno urban cluster' consists of clustered, differentiated settlement mounds based on mixed subsistence and craftworking and apparently without a ruling elite (McIntosh 1999; McIntosh 2015). This is one of the places in the African past that is best recognized as an alternative political structure, and it is widely cited. Yet these are only a few of the many examples that could be pulled from the African past, and which are excluded from this global story of the origins of the state.

The diversity of places that do not feature in this conversation should give us pause when framing the past as a means of understanding the present. There is a problem of geography here, and also a problem of chronology. Many of the African state-like formations are much later in time than the Mesopotamian examples; they were often 'secondary' in origins. This has traditionally meant their exclusion from these models, but I would like to argue that later states might have more to tell us about the global present. In particular the rise of capitalist, mercantile economies, which fuelled the rise of many of Africa's 'secondary' states (Leyser *et al.* 2018), might be more relevant to the understanding of contemporary geopolitics than the conditions of Mesopotamian slaves.

In general, the disruptive approach to standard narratives found in *Against the Grain* is a welcome force for archaeological discussion. The ways that archaeological data were summarized and brought to bear on thinking through relations of power were insightful and interesting. Next, we can hope that Scott might turn his attention to non-state groups, perhaps moving to less well-ploughed furrows.

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Response

James C. Scott

The fact that 10 notable scholars have taken the time to examine my book *Against the Grain* and provide thoughtful commentary is a form of flattery of which I am acutely conscious and very grateful. This would be the case even if their comments had ben totally damning! I braced myself for the onslaught of a phalanx of archaeologists justifiably indignant that a rank amateur should even dare trespass

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