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Against Scott's *Grain*

Timothy R. Pauketat

Cultivars domesticated and organized people. Cereal grain-growing agriculturists—at least those lucky enough to live in floodplains—exploited others in order to sustain themselves. From such preconditions, states were born, the organizational fragilities of which routinely led to their dissolution, and to other sorts of social forms in peripheral locations. This is James Scott's *Against the Grain* in a nutshell.

Scott's stated purpose is to bring the latest archaeological understanding of the earliest states to the public, and in so doing argue against the ideas of state inevitability and stability, of a broad-spectrum agricultural revolution and of the primacy of storage technology and deterministic demographic pressure, among other things. Flood-retreat cultivation, cereal grains and diseases that incubated in the 'multispecies resettlement camps' (p. 84) of ancient villages are among the causal factors that Scott prefers. Such agricultural processes, we are told, are the foundations of states, and these early chapters on pre-state villages and agriculture—along with Scott's own indomitable rationality—are the strengths of this book. And it is a good book.

This said, I want another book, one that questions rather than affirms the pre-modern state. My desire is rooted in the difficulty of defining the state (p. 23), although Scott vaguely describes states to be tax-collecting political structures that encompass territories (pp. 15, 184, 223). In sidestepping rigid definitions of states, Scott is right for the wrong reasons. The question—what was *or is* the state?—should be asked in order to initiate a critical interrogation into the past, if not also our archaeology and its implications for the future. We should be asking whether or not we legitimate our own state(s) by assuming that 'the state' *evolved* in the distant past. Again, what was *or is* the state?

The late sociologist Phillip Abrams, writing in 1977, recognized how much our thoughts and actions hinge on our critical appraisals of the state and the processes of state-making:

> We have come to take the state for granted as an object of political practice and political analysis while remaining quite spectacularly unclear as to what the state is. We are variously urged to respect the state, or smash the state or study the state; but for want of clarity about the nature of the state such projects remain beset with difficulties (Abrams 1988, 59).
>
> [W]e should recognize that cogency of the *idea* of the state as an ideological power and treat that as a compelling object of analysis. But the very reasons that require us to do that also require us not to *believe* in the idea of the state, not to concede, even as an abstract formal-object, the existence of the state (Abrams 1988, 79, emphasis original).

Unfortunately, the uncertainty and urgency one feels in Abrams' words are mitigated if we put the origins of the state in the distant past, as does Scott (and many archaeologists). Scott focuses on the putative earliest Near Eastern states over others around the world, as if the 'pristine' process mattered more than the state-making of later people. This is an evolutionary tack, to be sure, to be contrasted with, for want of a better descriptor, a historical one. At other times, Scott tacks to the historical side. In any event, I can agree with Scott and others that the earliest states were 'historically novel institutions' (p. 30) and 'unprecedented concentrations of domesticated plants, animals, and people' (p. 5). But we need more historical details in order to explain state-making as a historical process that, surely, is yet with us. *How* were these tax-collecting territorial states like or unlike others? *How* did the onlooking world accommodate them, or even help to create them? *How* were they related to city formation, building projects, or immigration? *How* did the peculiar configurations of the land, sky, rain, or sun, among many other things, engage people and set the stage of state formation?

To Scott's credit, he does allow for non-human agencies in this book, laying some causal weight on the properties of, say, floodplains, climate, plants and animals. But the upshot tends to do little more than conflate large-scale entities or organizations with agency. This conflation leads Scott, reasoning like a typical twentieth-century materialist, to essentialize human societies, especially the state. In this materialist vein, Scott loses sight of the fact that any society is an abstraction, not an actual, functioning thing (*à la*

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Abrams 1988). It is filled with people whose self-interests are often underserved by some sovereignty or governmental body, even though those same people, from time to time, may be complicit in propping up the administrative or social order. States are, hence, not simply the political structure, but the whole tension-filled, contradictory, administrative, and social-territorial mess.

Certainly, states to Scott seldom seem to have involved participatory arenas of politics and culture, although an earlier generation of historians and social scientists once maintained precisely this (following Gramsci 1971). The 'official secret' of the state, said Abrams (1988), is 'the non-existence of the state'—a tongue-in-cheek comment meant to convey that 'it' was not, and is not, a real thing, territory, or bureaucratic structure, but a distributed set of relationships in which people find themselves entangled. Abrams and other Marxist-inspired scholars used the words 'ideology' and 'cultural hegemony' to convey the distributed and consensual character of the state. Today, a newer kind of materialist/archaeologist might put it this way: state ideologies and hegemonies are arrays of things and places within which we exist, often without conscious reflection on that existence (see Harris & Cippola 2017). Even resistance to the state is bounded and constrained by such stately assemblages.

Such a textured, loosely articulated and complex understanding of states—blurring the lines between a political 'structure' and a 'way' of life (both of which should now be understood as entangled configurations of beings, places, things and substances)—is not to be found in *Grain.* Scott's states are all stick—slavery, taxes, coercion—and no carrot—religion, returns, *esprit de corps*. Of course, the same criticism could be levelled at Scott's earlier work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), in which political opposition was always conscious, not ideological and certainly not engrained within everyday, subaltern fields of materials and movements. That book, too, was quite good; it was influential in my own writing at the time. However, in both that book and this one there is very little culture and cultural history, and there is hardly any recognition of the power of place or the force of spiritual relations or the possible significance of non-modern ontologies in our understanding of how and why people did what they did in the past. There is very little acknowledgement that the experiential, religious, material and affective qualities of life mattered in either the short or long terms. Thus, one seeks in vain for any acknowledgement in this book of the oddities and possible historical ramifications of, say, a Göbekli Tepe or a Çatalhöyük. One similarly seeks in vain fine-grained descriptions of what a city was or did. Were not cities also premier sites of state-making (Lefebvre 1991)? Were they—or their affective dimensions, materials and occupants—not agentic? In fact, such powers, relations, ontologies and affects are amply attested at various pre-state Near Eastern sites and in cuneiform records of Mesopotamian states themselves. Every major transaction or transubstantiation in the ancient Near East was afforded by a spirit or a god! And it is entirely likely that the founders of the first cities and states did not relate to their worlds (of plants, animals, landscapes, skyscapes, atmospheres, spirits, etc.) like we do. So how well would Scott's or any rationalist's logic alone explain the earliest states (whatever those were)?

In the end, even Scott's fragile states appear like organisms rather than cultural and ideological constructs or hybrid human–non-human 'territorializations' (*à la* Deleuze & Guattari 1987). The behaviours of any one state organism, perhaps even our own, might be inferred from any other. Such reductionism leads the reader well away from any critical thoughts about the 'illusion' of the state, in the sense of Abrams (1988). Lacking that, the state—our state—will be legitimated in the minds of *Grain's* target audience. The upshot, for them, is that the state is something that emerged, naturally, oh so long ago in Mesopotamia—something that we all accept without question, something that cannot be changed today.

Conceptually, there is precious little in *Grain* that runs against the grain of a shopworn, late twentieth-century materialism. I do not blame Scott for this, but archaeology generally. Archaeologists can and should do more to produce fine-grained historical data that afford a critical rethinking of the ancient state. To do this, *we need better material-social histories* of more-than-people and, certainly, more than societies (Alt & Pauketat 2019). Of course, to realize such histories, archaeologists will first need to stop scientizing the state, reducing it to an organismic entity. It was not, and is not today. In a sense, we need to stop defining and delimiting 'the state' so that we can understand the state. Now that would be a deep history.

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