An Americanist's Take on *Against the Grain*

Terence N. D'Altroy

In both public and professional accounts of the grand sweep of human history, a few questions recurrently beg for attention. How did technology—broadly understood to encompass everything from control of fire to domestication of food sources, to craft manufacture, to communication and transportation—transform human life? How did social complexity come into being: e.g. classes, formal institutions and the state? Why did some ancient societies invest so much effort in corporate constructions such as pyramids, temples and other monumental architecture? What were the effects of warfare and disease on the human condition? And why did the early societies of so many regions cycle between eras of concentrated power and its apparent dissolution?

The political scientist James C. Scott takes on an array of those issues in his fluid and engaging counter-narrative, *Against the Grain*. It joins other works that have captured the public's attention, such as *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond 1998) and *1491* (Mann 2005), as forceful studies of human history, told from the perspective of adventurous outsiders diving into specialist-infested waters. Informed by a professional interest in how people avoid being governed and a personal curiosity about the past, Scott's vision falls outside what he takes to be the prevailing account of ancient society. My intent here is to contextualize his discussion, with the hope of providing a broader frame of reference for reading his work. I will focus on the issues where my own research lies: the comparative study of early states and empires. My regional interests lie in the Americas before the European invasions, in particular the Inka empire of Andean South America.

A central premise of Scott's text is that the standing narratives of human history from simple foragers to the first empires systematically downplay the costs of major transformations in favour of a celebratory tale of human progress. Much of the discussion is framed in terms of the author's encounter with countervailing information that points to a darker side to humanity's past. While the overall text is uneven, Scott makes a number of salutary emendations to the account against which he writes, but for which he regrettably does not cite any publications. Most significantly, he underscores the repression, exploitation and social and biological costs of early states and empires—issues that have been underplayed by those who pitch modern (generally Western) society as the apex of human life.

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Scott's perspective is fundamentally an ecological, materialist and rationalist view of human decision-making. He views social history as being guided by environmental conditions and human–nature relationships, and contends that people with power organize society to their own benefit. Among other aspects of his argument, his focus on the biological tradeoffs of an increasing commitment to grain-based agriculture has much to commend it. It took many centuries for societies that were increasingly dependent on a principal grain crop to find an appropriate mix with other sources of cultivated or foraged food, so as to mitigate against the effects of dietary deficiencies. The adoption of a maize-based diet in the Americas, for example, was attended by an increase in tooth decay and wear through grinding, and an initial shortage of two amino acids, which led to an increase in osteoporosis. Further, the simplification of the ecosystem that arose from inordinate dependence on a particular crop created conditions favouring famine caused by blight, pillaging, or other kinds of crop failures (e.g. nineteenth-century Ireland). In the highland Andes, for example, crops could fail as often as two years out of three (Cobo 1979). Scott's discussion of the potential perils of water- and air-borne disease brought on by the increasing concentration of the population in urban environments is also on solid ground; Storey (1983) has chronicled the high mortality rate in the Tlajinga 33 neighbourhood of first-millennium AD Teotihuacan, Mexico.

Much of Scott's discussion revolves around the practices by which people in power consolidated control. In this area, he underscores the means by which early elites could command labour, staple assessments or more monetized forms of taxation to sustain their activities and preferential statuses. As he describes, early states and their successor empires were highly stratified societies, with disproportionate power concentrated in the hands of a limited number of kin groups or institutions, such as the temples or military. And slaves may well have been a key part of the labour force in some regions, whether secured through capture, purchase, or debt obligation. An additional favourable point of the discussion is tied to Scott's sympathetic viewpoint for the people whose lives were despoiled by the elite sectors of society. His emphasis on the disjuncture between the political fortunes of early polities and the quality of life for the populace in general is well taken. The obligations of taxation or military service may well have been a strong inducement to avoid state dominion by many peoples, and the collapse of particular dynasties may have sometimes been a welcome state of affairs.

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All that to the good, and as compelling as the writing often is, I am chary of accepting much of Scott's argument straight up. If we take the author's goal to be to inform non-specialists about much of the current professional knowledge about early human society, then Scott is often successful, having done a much better job of meeting that challenge than most academics. If his goal is to induce professionals to rethink their own understanding of the past, I am less sanguine, for two reasons. The first is that much of the dark, exploitative side of civilization for which we have solid research has already been accepted in the literature, and Scott's references are only selectively current. He cites the brilliant work of Hans Nissen and Robert McC. Adams, for instance, as revolutionizing our understanding of politics, demographics, irrigation and urban processes in early Mesopotamia. Those writings were assuredly transformative, but they are also 30–40 years old; they have long been incorporated into our accounts of the time and place, and have been appropriately modified by scores of other scholars as research has continued.

Second, and more problematic, is that a number of the most important inferences that Scott draws from his own interpretations are better understood either as overgeneralizations or as propositions to be tested through investigation, rather than as conclusions to be accepted. Among the most significant of those concern the universality of a grain-based subsistence in early complex polities, the power and unity of the early states, the role of environmental change in state emergence, the importance of disease in societal collapse, and the nature of labour recruitment, especially through slavery. Similarly, he draws upon narrowly defined conceptions of the relationships among ideas, forms of graphical expression and control of information.

At the foundation of his argument, Scott works with several premises that I wish that he had unpacked or substantiated further. Most important is his settling on the 'state' as a particular kind of society in which the core powers act as a unitary body with internally shared interests. While he recognizes that states are best understood in terms of gradations, rather than absolutes, he opts for the defining features for the state as those characteristics 'that point to territoriality and a specialized state apparatus: walls, tax collection, and officials' (pp. 118–19), as well as 'a specialist scribal class, soldiers (full-time?) with armor, and efforts at standardizing weights and measures' (p. 120). That view appears to stem to a great extent from his reliance on the particulars of the southern Mesopotamia polities. The kinds of bureaucrats that he apparently sees as differentiated along particular lines—e.g. tax collectors, accountants—were not defined as such in early state order anywhere in the Americas. In addition, he seems to see all important cleavages within ancient state societies as lying between the state and subordinate classes, between states, or between states and barbarians, broadly conceived. The internal dynamics of states, the factional competitions, the dynastic infighting and the conflicts between institutions or founts of power (e.g. royalty, great families, temples, landed provincial aristocrats, military)—all crucial to the histories of those early societies—do not enter the picture in much detail.

A related concern is his premise that a particular set of early states and empires can be used as effective proxies for other polities across the globe. As just noted, his discussion of early complexity concentrates on Mesopotamia, whose extensively studied states were the earliest on the planet and thus merit special attention. For empires, he draws heavily on Rome, and to a lesser extent on imperial Athens and Qin China. In the last few decades, however, we have come to recognize that features at the heart of Mesopotamian history (especially Uruk and the Early Dynastic) were often anomalous on the world stage: e.g. the centrality of urbanization, a dependence on irrigated grain crops, an initial economic focus for writing, the early creation of formal legal codes and the emergence of at least a partial separation of religious and secular institutions (see e.g. Rothman 2001). In a comparative framework, perhaps the only region with early, fortified urbanism to rival Mesopotamia was China. Egypt and lowland Mesoamerican societies had far less concentrated settlement patterns (without defensive walls), and pastoral states arose in the Asian steppes, the upper Nile, and the Andean altiplano largely through internal dynamics, not just as mirrors or off-shoots of sedentary agrarian polities (e.g. Honeychurch 2014). Mesopotamian writing's emergence in the context of institutional accounting is also unusual among the world's writing systems, in that codified graphical recording did not generally arise elsewhere as a tool to keep track of people or goods. For centuries, early Chinese, Egyptian, and multiple Mesoamerican writing systems concentrated far more on genealogies, histories, calendrics, divination and ritual practices, and sacred geographies, than on economics.

Equally problematic is Scott's assertion that early states were invariably dependent upon grain-based agriculture, whose productivity could be exploited by the state apparatus. The empirical evidence indicates that such an assumption is not warranted, as in the just-noted pastoral states of the Asian steppes, Nubia and the altiplano. The proto-state of Hawai'i did not rely upon a grain, and the earliest states of South America depended on a wide range of subsistence bases, from the mixed maritime-agricultural economies of coastal Peru to the tuber-quinoa-pastoral economies of the Lake Titicaca basin. What seems to have been the essential feature was a reliable subsistence base that could sustain relatively large populations—perhaps several tens of thousands—that could be unified politically. Similarly, the civilized state/barbarian dichotomy—which may resonate for Mesopotamia, Rome, and China—is inapplicable to the western hemisphere. There were no barbarian challengers threatening to raid state stores outside the urban gates or beyond the reach of early states in Mesoamerica or South America. Competition, instead, lay either internally or between roughly peer polities. So Mesopotamia was precocious and innovative, definitely—a proxy for the rest of the world's prehistory, not so much.

With respect to labour and the importance of slavery in its mobilization, Scott relies heavily for his solid data on Athens at its height, imperial Rome and Qin China. There

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are multiple reasons why those cases, important though they may be, do not work well as standards by which to assess other societies of the ancient world. To use the practices of imperial Rome of the first–second centuries AD as a proxy for earlier, non-imperial polities is roughly akin to using the labour organization of seventeenth-century AD Europe as a model for the same region in the twelfth century. A similar kind of retrodiction is used by citing Qin and Han for early state China (i.e. Hsia, Western Zhou). Despite the author's *caveat*s about the various forms of servitude under which large proportions of early state existed, this reader was left with the impression that Scott means to contend that the condition of slavery was the overwhelming source of labour for those societies, and that core-barbarian relationships were predicated on the slave trade. That conceptualization, to me, overly simplifies the range of different kinds of obligations that were imposed upon or accepted by the non-elite populace.

As a final thought, perhaps from the perspective of one of those grouchy specialists, if he were to do a second edition of this book, I would urge the author to move past the idea that early state societies were sufficiently similar to one another that we can compress them into a generalized entity. That goes both for societies of comparable complexity and for states along a scale from those marking emergent complexity to those with imperial designs.

Overall, Scott's text makes a significant contribution to informing a large audience of many of the downsides of the emergence of early complex society. That his text may be taken as transformative speaks simultaneously to his own contributions and to the failures of academics specializing in ancient history to convey the big picture to a broad audience. I applaud his effort, but where the text falls short is precisely in those areas where he wishes to extend his argument—e.g. in the universal importance of slavery and in the role of disease in political collapse. There, and elsewhere, the key points the author wishes to make will require further research to move them from the realm of assertion or supposition to substantiated knowledge.

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Pathways from Farmers to States around the Globe

Robert D. Drennan

In *Against the Grain*, James Scott has produced an admirably broad and sweeping account of state origins. He takes humans' first use of fire as his starting point and works his way toward states by way of the transition to settled agricultural life in the Neolithic. The intended audience would seem to be primarily the general public, for whom Scott's goals are 'condensing the best knowledge we have … and then suggesting what it implies' (p. xii). It is clearly, however, an audience more professionally concerned with state origins that he has in mind when he says '…these implications … are meant to be provocations … intended to stimulate further reflection and research' (p. xiii), and his book provides plenty of fuel for such stimulation.

Scott is eager to challenge a 'standard narrative' (p. 9) of human progress enabled by a series of technological advances running from mobile Palaeolithic foragers through sedentary Neolithic farmers to early (and later) states. This narrative was always more ethnocentrism and ideology than social science (as Scott points out) and was tidily summed up in anglophone archaeology by V. Gordon Childe (1936) in *Man Makes Himself*. Scott

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