

BOOK REVIEWS

JAMES C. SCOTT

Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States

Yale University Press, 2017. xvii + 312 p. \$26.00.

Homo sapiens have existed for at least 200,000 years. Life was simple at first. Then, about 10,000 years ago, our ancestors began to switch from hunting and gathering to farming. Jared Diamond in 1987 famously called agriculture “the worst mistake in the history of the human race” because it brought “the gross social and sexual inequality, the disease and despotism, that curse our existence.” Mark Cohen and George Armelagos wrote in 2013 (p. xxx) that Diamond’s essay “is the latest in a long list of those that criticize the transformation to agriculture.” The list is now longer, and includes a recent book written by political scientist James C. Scott.

Scott condenses the best of this literature, explores the implications for formation of states, then argues that emergence of states made the health and lives of non-elite masses even worse. The surveyed literature, including a book by Richard Manning, the title of which Scott (p. xv) confesses to have poached, focuses on nutritional stress (from the replacement of a varied diet with a few starchy foods), physical stress (from hard farm labor), and infectious disease (spread in concentrated human and animal populations). By 1982, paleopathologists had unearthed sufficient evidence to produce a consensus that agriculture caused human life expectancy and health to deteriorate for all but a small elite. Fertility increased sharply, however. This more than offset increased mortality, so the population slowly grew, accelerating eventually in a “demographic explosion of agricultural peoples at the expense of hunters and gatherers” (p. 83).

Looking at the history of early states, Scott finds the the type of crop grown by farmers to be extremely important. The “first small, stratified, tax-collecting, walled states,” he writes, “pop up in the Tigris and Euphrates Valley only around 3,100 BCE, more than four millenia *after* the first crop domestications and sedentism” (p. 7). Grain (wheat, barley, rice, or maize) was essential because it can be stored, rationed, and taxed. This is why “virtually all classical states were based on grain, including millets. History records no cassava states, no sago, yam, taro, plaintain, breadfruit or sweet potato states” (p. 21).

Ancient history was written by elites, not by the illiterate masses, so it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine the independent effect that states may have had on the quality of life of the masses. One commonly used measure of success is population size. Scott mentions (p. 96) that world population “according to one careful estimate” was about 4 million in 10,000 BCE, 5 million in 5,000 BCE, increasing to “more than 100 million” by 1 CE. He does not cite his source, but the two BCE figures are identical to those of McEvedy and Jones (pp. 343–344), who add that population growth accelerated after 5,000 BCE, with world population reaching 100 million in 500 BCE, 150 million by the 2nd century BCE, and 200 million by the 2nd century CE. They attribute population growth to development of agriculture, but this growth coincides with, so could also be attributed to, development of early states. Scott barely mentions population growth, other than noting that it

was the product of high fertility offsetting the high mortality of peasants and slaves, who subsisted on an ever-increasing supply of grain.

In contrast with his limited attention to population size, Scott devotes an entire chapter (pp. 150–182) to methods of population control, needed to compel subjects to produce a grain surplus in excess of their own needs. Scott emphasizes the coercion and slavery present in early states, though both existed long before states appeared. He applies (tongue-in-cheek) the term “barbarian” to “the vast population not subject to state control”—those living outside the “line where taxes and grain end” (pp. 32, 33). Often this line was a physical wall built, Scott asserts, for the sole purpose of “control and confinement of populations” (p. 139). By ignoring the possibility that walls provide security for those residing within them, Scott approves of, and goes beyond, “Owen Lattimore’s admonition that the great walls of China were built as much to keep Chinese taxpayers *in* as to keep the barbarians *out*” (p. 30).

Scott’s principal conclusion is that the role of the state has been less important than normally assumed, and that humans able to avoid or escape the heavy hand of the state were better off than those living within its confines. He sees nothing good in the early states, which were “more often an added threat to subsistence than its benefactor” (p. 124). States brought a “plague of taxes in the form of grain, labor, and conscription over and above onerous agricultural work” (p. 21). They did not invent slavery and human bondage, but they did invent “large-scale societies based systematically on coerced, captive human labor” (p. 180). They did not invent warfare, but they scaled it up (p. 193). They did not always create famine, but they made it more likely: “a crop failure that, without taxes, might mean hunger could, after the state took its taxes, mean utter ruin” (p. 123).

For these reasons, Scott (pp. 209–218) praises the collapse of states. Use of the term “dark age” for a post-collapse period, he writes, is “often a form of propaganda”. The loss of a state center may not mean a loss of population, but rather its redistribution, the emancipation of subjects fleeing an oppressive regime. This is what Scott would like to believe, but is unable to prove. “The problem for the historian or archaeologist who seeks to illuminate a dark age is that our knowledge is so limited—that, after all, is why it’s called a ‘dark age’” (pp. 213–214).

The one good characteristic of early states, according to Scott, was their fragility. This allowed “barbarians” to enjoy a “golden age” that lasted until about 1600 CE. With porous borders, it was possible for anyone to flee “to the periphery to escape state-induced poverty, taxes, bondage, and war” (p. 234). Moreover, “a large share of the world’s population had never seen a (routine) tax collector or, if they had seen one, still had the option of making themselves fiscally invisible” (p. 253).

Was the creation of states, like the creation of agriculture, a mistake? Is the state an institution that increases population size at the cost of subjecting most of the population to increased misery? History is written by elites, and oral history for the most part is inaccessible or unreliable, so historians can never determine whether early, classical states improved or worsened the condition of the typical human. We will have to wait for paleopathologists to provide us a tentative answer.

References

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GÖRAN THERBORN

Cities of Power: The Urban, the National, the Popular, the Global

London: Verso, 2017. 408 p. \$35.00.

Göran Therborn is an eminent Swedish sociologist with a bent toward wide-ranging comparative studies. In an earlier work, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900–2000* (2004) (reviewed by A. Dharmalingam in *PDR* 34, no. 1), he sought to characterize and locate broad patterns of family organization. Families, he argued, could be roughly marshaled by their variants of patriarchy, marriage, and fertility, and the exercise of (male) power within each sphere, yielding a complex but roughly geographical typology of family systems. In the present work he turns to the world's capital cities. The scope is similarly wide, but the materials, belying their apparent tangibility, are if anything more diffuse and refractory, the typological task messier. His new book is ambitious, vastly detailed, and opaque.

The adjectival nouns of the book's subtitle identify separate social forces Therborn sees as bearing on the city's physical and cultural form. The urban is the force of the city's historical built environment and traditions, narrowing or guiding later directions of change. The national is the power of the emergent nation-state, concentrated in the capital city. The popular refers to subaltern challenges to the established order and authority of the national government. And the global, to transnational capitalism.

While these are thematic threads woven throughout, the actual organization of the book rests on a simple categorization of nation-states by their route to statehood: the countries of Europe; the New World settler societies; the ex-colonies; and those few states that avoided or only briefly succumbed to colonization—and thus retained more cultural continuity with the past. Each group followed a distinctive path of state formation, with implications for urban development. Besides these ideal-type trajectories, a fifth, hybrid category is added to accommodate Russia and China. Lengthy accounts of the trajectories, and of the capital cities they gave rise to, make up the first half of the book. For the never-colonies, for example, the development path, termed *reactive modernization*, in the author's characteristically dense gloss "refers to the socio-political transformations towards a conception of political rule at least decisively dependent on, if not necessarily legally or ideologically deriving from, the nation, brought about from above, in a context of acute external threat" (p. 147). The threat was from European or US imperialism, and the modernization effort in a sense was in order to *preserve* tradition. The principal cities in this group are Tokyo, Bangkok, Istanbul, Ankara, Tehran, and Addis Ababa.