### *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* James C. Scott, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2017. 336 pages. ISBN 978-0300182910. $26.00.

James C. Scott gave two lectures in 2011 on plant and animal domestication and the earliest states. But the discussion afterwards convinced him that his arguments "were not remotely ready for prime time" (x). So he plunged into five years of research on these topics, and the result is this work under review. Scott's central aim is to examine to what extent "settling down" to fixed-field farming, and the subsequent rise of states, actually represented, as the conventional narrative holds, an advance in the well-being of the people who underwent those transformations.

One reason Scott doubts the conventional story is the great instability of early states. Besides "extrinsic" causes, such as climatic events, Scott cites three "intrinsic" causes of the demise of early states: the high incidence of disease caused by the unprecedented crowding of human beings and their livestock, the huge new demand for lumber that stripped watersheds of a barrier to flooding, and intensive irrigation that led to salinization of the soil.

Scott also dismisses the belief that we can categorize people into a scale of "advancement" based on whether they were hunter-gatherers, shifting cultivators, pastoralists or settled farmers. Instead, people readily shifted between these modes of living based on environmental conditions. Furthermore, he notes, the hunter-gatherer lifestyle required much greater cognitive resources than did a settled agricultural life.

In fact, Scott insists, there is no single point at which hunter-gatherers suddenly become farmers. "Pre-agricultural" people used "hundreds of techniques" (p. 70) to modify their environment to get more of the plants they used. Given the richness of pre-agricultural food sources, the question of why fixed-field grain farming was adopted in the first place remains unanswered. The mystery deepens when we contemplate that, in the process of domesticating cereals and livestock, we were forced, to a great extent, to domesticate ourselves as well, devoting an extraordinary degree of attention to these increasingly fragile food sources.

Early states, Scott holds, were based upon collecting people in a limited area who could produce a surplus of some cereal, and then collecting that surplus to support the state. He outlines why cereals are crucial here: cereals grow above ground, and so are easily surveyed, and they ripen all at once, so the tax collector knows when to come around for collection. Some degree of coercion was necessary to extract the surplus for the state, but early states faced a delicate balancing act: since there were always non-state regions close by, if their extractions became too onerous, the state's subjects might flee. States often responded to this threat by erecting barriers to flight, such as the Great Wall of China. Another measure that early states employed to fight the loss of subjects was the capturing of slaves in war.

Scott closes with a chapter entitled "The Golden Age of the Barbarians." He notes how for millennia after the rise of the first states, the vast majority of the globe's population lived outside of states. But among those non-state peoples, a few took on special status as "barbarians": they were at the periphery of a state, and their lives and their economies were deeply intertwined with those of their state-dwelling counterparts. At times, they interacted with their neighbor states simply by raiding. But a more stable strategy was to agree, in return for abjuring raiding, that they receive some form of subsidy. These barbarians realized that running a protection racket is a better long-run strategy than wiping out the source of revenue, a strategy Scott notes "is hard to distinguish from the archaic state itself" (p. 141). While the lives of barbarians may have been both healthier and freer than their neighbors living within states, Scott notes two "melancholy" aspects of this golden age: by capturing slaves for states, and providing states with military service, "the barbarians willingly dug their own grave" (p. 256).

Many of Scott's contentions in this work are speculative, and new research may overturn some of the bases for them. Nevertheless, this is a landmark work, with which future studies on the rise of the state will have to contend.