

life for the better (193). Given that such self-transformation occurs simultaneously with world transformation, such a move might also lead to increased global justice.

Both Ackerly and Lefebvre are careful to note that each of their approaches to human rights is just one of many possible interpretations. I find both to be valuable, and all the more so when read in light of each other.

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James C. Scott: *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii, 312.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670519000068

In *Against the Grain* James C. Scott hopes that his outsider's perspective will enable him to bring new thinking to the standard narrative according to which human progress brought sedentism, agriculture, and state building, "each step presumed to represent an epoch leap in mankind's well-being: more leisure, better nutrition, longer life expectancy, and at long last, a settled life that promoted the household arts and the development of civilization" (9). Yet, in my view, rather than providing new insights, the book succeeds only in resurrecting the now-discredited Western-centric orientalist tradition, one nurtured by imperialist and colonialist ideology, that saw early state-building as a destructive and despotic process. To Scott, all instances of early state-building followed a set pattern in which emergent leaders selfishly devised a "control and appropriation" apparatus (116) with the goal to monopolize wealth and power. He argues, for example, that in early Mesopotamian states, the book's primary focus, labor was mobilized and controlled through slaving and wars aiming at labor capture (e.g., 144), and, he supposes, city-wall building was required to prevent flight of oppressed slave-subjects (138–39) (although the evidence points to defensive purposes). Further, he argues, cuneiform writing made the state a "recording, registering, and measuring machine" (139) at the same time state builders extended their control beyond Mesopotamia proper by building a vast extractive system based, again, on forced labor, a claim that runs counter to the consensus of area specialists that he chooses to dispute (157) while providing no supporting evidence.

The relatively egalitarian and socially complex societies of ancient Mesopotamia present a strong challenge for a scholar who, like Scott, sees

the world through an orientalist lens, because societal governance was more distributed and egalitarian than he allows for. For example, governance was enacted in multiple institutional settings, including the characteristic Mesopotamian temple institutions. These are viewed by most scholars as quasi-governmental entities that provided notable economic benefits to citizens, but Scott sees them only as integral parts of the oppressive and singular state/slave apparatus. Political leadership also involved heads of merchant groups and ethnic or kin groups, and even the earliest texts allude to the role of well-established citizen assemblies (higher and lower) in societal decision-making (e.g., Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State* [Cambridge University Press, 2005], 111–12, 149–51, 214). While kingship did eventually make its appearance in the institutional structure of Mesopotamian polities, assemblies persisted and provided a moderating influence on the exercise of kingly power (e.g., Daniel E. Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors: Mari and Early Collective Governance* [Cambridge University Press, 2004]).

To develop a critique of the control and appropriation model as applied to Mesopotamia, it is important to note that the earliest state formation in this region occurred during the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr Periods (3800 to roughly 2900 BCE). I mention this chronology to make the point that Scott's control and appropriation apparatus cannot be confirmed for this crucial phase of initial state-building when institutions were developed or elaborated on that persisted over thousands of years of subsequent Mesopotamian history. City walls, for example, were not built until late in this initial sequence, or even during the subsequent Early Dynastic Period (2900 to 2350 BCE). Wall building is associated with an institutional complex developed during that period that included the rise of kings, palaces, royal burials, and increased intercity warfare, but wars are well documented only after about 2400 BCE and extensive evidence for slavery and captive taking date even later, during the Old Babylonian Period (2004–1595 BCE) (e.g., Seth Richardson, "Early Mesopotamia, the Presumptive State," *Past and Present* 215 [2012]: 3–48). Scott admits that Mesopotamian researchers have found little evidence for a slave-based economy during the initial phase of state building, but, as I previously mentioned, the findings of area specialists matter little to him (157), a tendency that has been noted previously, for example by Victor Lieberman in his comments on *The Art of Not Being Governed* in the *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010), and by Harold Brookfield in his comments on the same volume in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12 (2011). Lacking direct evidence, Scott turns to his preferred method, an unsystematic comparative approach that involves randomly wandering through diverse civilizations and time periods, including the Greco-Roman tradition, to locate what he thinks will be evidence supporting his claims (e.g., 150–57, 164–82), but he never makes it clear how the cited examples might have relevance to fourth-millennium Mesopotamia.

Scott's antistatist ideological take on taxation, one of the book's most consistent themes, aligns with what we hear every day from neoliberal-inspired economists and politicians. He sees taxes as a "plague" (21) that could bring "utter ruin" to farmers (123), and, he claims, it was the state's demand for taxes that accounts for the prevailing production system. Subject populations, he argues, would never have turned to the "unremitting toil" (94) of agro-pastoralism unless they had, "as it were, a pistol at their collective temple" (93) (this in spite of the fact that irrigated grain production in the alluvium is two to three times more productive than rainfall-based production in adjacent regions). Why was the state so eager to compel agro-pastoralism? Scott's answer is that the taxman prefers cereals, such as barley and wheat, that ripen and are harvested in large quantities and thus can be easily measured and appropriated. An implication of this argument is that there exist what he terms "fiscally sterile" forms of production (135) that preclude state-building, most notably, perennial-based horticulture that produces constantly or irregularly rather than in easily taxable lump sums. I think Scott is skating on some very thin ice with this argument when he follows it by writing that "there was no such thing as a state that did not rest on an alluvial, grain-farming population" (117), or as he puts it, "no cassava states" (21). Perhaps he is referring to the very earliest states, which did tend toward cereal production, but Scott's stated claim is bound to antagonize the many scholars who have devoted their work to the study of early states in tropical and horticultural regions, most notably in wide swaths of sub-Saharan Africa.

I find the concept of fiscally sterile production problematic also because it ignores the possibility that subjects, irrespective of production system, might willingly comply with tax obligations in exchange for beneficial services provided by the state, as is argued by collective action theorists such as Margaret Levi (*Of Rule and Revenue* [University of California Press, 1988]). Scott very briefly alludes to the fact that early Mesopotamian states provided much-needed grain distributions in emergencies, and he acknowledges the possibility that state formation might have been a joint creation of state-builders and citizens ("a social contract, perhaps?") (138). Yet, aside from brief mentions, he ignores the possibility that collective action might have played a role in state building because it would imply a serious challenge to his preferred control and appropriation approach.

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