

# Avoiding the Blame — What a Focus on Grain Obscures

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James C. Scott's latest book, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, is sure to become a classic and a brick in the wall of core anarchist theory. It covers somewhat different but complementary ground to Peter Gelderloo's *Worshipping Power: An Anarchist History Of Early State Formation*. I have some significant critiques of the narratives it pushes, particularly around the character and downfall of early stateless sedentary agricultural societies, but on the whole I loved this book.

Scott is admirably nuanced and attentive to more complex contemporary discoveries and insights. This is not a book pushing the simplistic primitivist line. It notes in detail the kind of exceptions that I've been pointing out for over a decade, the complexity and diversity of the historical record, as well as the marked non-inevitability of it. If Gelderloos documents socio-cultural pathways for state formation, attacking marxist and primitivist narratives, Scott carries a similar nuance to detailing the ecological and technological context. Certain environments and technological forms made states *possible*, but certainly not *obligatory*. (Whether one reads possibility as *probability* depends on where one stands on the independent power of culture.)

Scott has become something of a patron saint among left market anarchists and he is consistently honest about the depth of trade throughout human history and social forms. I hate beating this dead horse but a never ending stream of fresh-faced communists continue asserting to me that states created the very premise of markets. The idea is laughable and clearly wrong in every nook and cranny of human history. Just because trade often took the form of informal credit within tribes, doesn't mean their societies weren't broadly riven with trade. Hunter-gatherers had elaborate and far-reaching trade networks. Stateless agricultural societies did as well. Scott, being infamously attentive to illegibility, recognizes markets and merchants as deeply antipathetic to state power, both when without and within.

*“One reason for the official distrust and stigmatization of the merchant class in China was the simple fact that its wealth, unlike that of the rice planter, was illegible, concealable, and fugitive. One might tax a market[place], or collect tolls on a road or river junction where goods and transactions were more transparent, but taxing merchants was a tax collector's nightmare.”*

Responding to my review of *Worshipping Power*, Peter Gelderloos agreed that markets, even very mature ones, in no way oblige the creation of a state. His quibble was that they nevertheless provide an exploitable precondition for the existence of states. Well let us remember that the adoption and use of fire is probably something of a precondition of states too. A whole narrative could be spun about how tribes that avoid using fire to instead eat raw meat are less likely to form anything like states without the caloric surpluses that fire unlocks. One could even go on about how the absence of campfires renders a populace more illegible and of course detail all the ways fire is utilized by state warfare. This doesn't mean fire is fucking bad or that we should outlaw it to better avoid statism. I'll say no more on the matter here.

Scott's focus in terms of "necessary preconditions" is more specific: sedentary grain agriculture. And to his credit he is very clear that states were only a "subspecies" of sedentary grain societies. Many avoided the state form.

He is also clear that states were inconstant and unstable, but also that "collapse" of a regime usually looked more like the decentralization of power rather than some kind of catastrophic reduction in population or cultural/economic complexity. The culture of civilization — presumably both its positives and negatives — often remained even as the abusive centralization of the state itself was demolished.

And Scott is quite good, like increasingly many other writers, at pointing out just how biased the historical record is towards state societies rather than the sophisticated stateless societies that seemingly now crop up everywhere in the historical record. The absence of centralized archaeological sites with titanic monuments certainly doesn't mean the absence of healthy stateless civilizations.

This is a profound bias to our current historical records that Gelderloos and myself have both been screaming about. If the perpetual anarchist cry is "We Are Still Here" what desperately needs emphasizing is that "We Have *Always* Been Here."

Scott also covers, albeit briefly, one of my favorite topics: the centrality of early writing as a statist technology. Writing is one of the most powerful computational augments to human cognition ever developed, and written records have unimaginably potent impacts upon culture and individual perception because they introduce a relative inflexibility of accounts. Early writing was also intensely inaccessible, requiring memorization and thus an elite scribal class. Eventually we see semitic slaves take up writing that mirrors speech and very quickly unleash millennialist religious uprisings of the oppressed. But in its initial introduction writing always served to strengthen state power.

Scott avoids most of these latter details in *Against the Grain*, but he is correct that early writing was an instrument of state power, a technology hard to apply to any other ends. He quotes C.C. Lamberg-Karlovsky:

*"[Why did] every distinctive community on the periphery reject the use of writing with so many archaeological cultures exposed to the complexity of southern Mesopotamia? ... Perhaps, far from being less intellectually qualified to deal with complexity, the peripheral peoples were smart enough to avoid its oppressive command structures for at least another 500 years, when it was imposed upon them by military conquest."*

Those of us who see writing — and indeed other means of augmented cognition — as liberatory desperately need to pay attention to the complex strategic landscape that such augmentations

exist within. A limited and clunky version of a tool can be worse than no tool at all. I've argued repeatedly that many of the downsides of the present internet are a consequence of just how starkly limited our information technologies still are. The same consideration should be taken in the case of agriculture.

Scott's nuance tears apart cartoonish primitivist narratives from the 70s that indict the entirety of agriculture. According to his arguments only a small subset of agricultural products or practices were edible to state forms. Caloric density, ease of mass preservation, legibility of crop yields to tax collectors, subdivisibility, and regularity of harvests were all needed. A state could not efficiently collect and store silos of beans, bananas, or tubers.

It's a good point, although as someone of Irish rebel and Ukrainian rebel ancestry I don't need to be reminded that potatoes are a starch crop that facilitates resistance to taxation.

Yet many primitivist narratives remain in *Against the Grain*, at least in some overarching form.

One example is the creeping conflation of domestication in the form of *mutualistic symbiosis* with domestication in the sense of *enslavement*. Scott talks of "domestication" in very negative tones — needed perhaps to push back against more mainstream schoolbook narratives, but still a limited counter-narrative.

Scott details ways in which domestication was a two-way street, but he casts both directions in terms of domination, rather than the obvious mutuality. He talks about how domestication changes brains, and breeds more neotenic traits. But what's wrong with extended childhood? I can think of no stronger representation of anarchism's aspirations than the triumph of childhood — of wild compassion, play, inquiry, and creativity — over the ossified alienation of adulthood.

And what does domestication do to brains? Scott focuses on how it breeds the fear out of animals. Lowering their anxiety about other creatures. This is not unto itself a necessarily negative thing. It facilitates cross-species collaboration and solidarity.

Wolves domesticated us just as we domesticated them, a process of deeply beneficial symbiosis. We became less afraid of them just as they became less afraid of us. And — it must be said — a marker of progress if one's ethics values the expansion of our empathy and circles of care.

Scott talks of villages as massive resettlement camps, a phrase with intended negative valences, but we might just as easily see them as new self-generating ecological niches. Mutualism between species doesn't evolve easily, the complexity involved not easily tunneled to when all you have are incremental gene changes over generations. Indeed the degree to which mutualism is present is seen as a marker of a highly evolved ecosystem. Human cognition, in short, allowed the pioneering of entirely new relationship webs that benefited a vast variety of species as well as an explosion of genetic development through cultivation.

Yet Scott portrays this interdependency in a negative light, as if a species' autonomy is some kind of primordial ethical good. I think this implicit notion deserves exposure, at the very least.

It must be emphasized that autonomy is not the same thing as freedom. Greater interdependency can radically expand the options we have. Indeed strictly speaking the negative liberty of "autonomy" or self-sufficiency can be a very isolating and stultifying sort of "liberty." Surely freedom is not retreat but the extension of our agency out into the world.

I make this case repeatedly when engaging with anticiv narratives but it's a point that bears repeating. Certainly "freedom to" sometimes critically requires some "freedom from" but we shouldn't confine ourselves to only a reactive defensive notion of liberation.

Scott's history is documenting stateless people's resistance to huge established power structures, usually through methods of retreat and obfuscation, so it's unsurprising that he reads historical situations through these lenses, but I think such ultimately limits his evaluations.

There are a couple big ways.

Scott sees a mystery in the fact that the neolithic revolution didn't lead to a population explosion and postulates disease as the explanation. Certainly less diverse ecosystems and higher density populations have a greater tendency towards plague, but — as usual when reading these accounts — the *anarchist* lens seems to be missing. What is unique about our present era that stopped the supposedly inevitable malthusian pressures? Culture. From a youth liberationist lens contemporary urbanization has been groundbreaking because it detached elder survival from how many child slaves you could generate. Freed to live longer, richer, more secure lives, the developed urban populations shifted their orientation towards child-rearing dramatically, allowing empathy to take over. Parents instead began to conceive of their children as almost human, and consequently focused on nurturing them. Instead of applying excess resources to make more children they utilized them to provide more for one or two children.

While parental relations to children remain almost universally toxic and abusive, they still shifted quite dramatically, and we might optimistically take this as a case of a preexisting tendency towards compassion reemerging the moment the shackles of agricultural serfdom came off and it became economically viable.

Simply put, it is likely the cold inhumanity of malthusianism that is the aberration.

Hunter-gatherer birthrates are generally drastically lower than agriculturalist birthrates, with cultures often deeply focused around showering attention and resources on a very few kids. In fact hunter-gatherer birthrates look a lot closer to modern progressive first world birthrates. The materialist explanation often given is that dramatic differences in body fat precipitate vastly different frequencies of ovulation — and huntergatherers tend to have very low levels of body fat. All other things being equal if you increase the fat, constant sex is likely to lead to more children. But a fourth or fifth as frequent ovulations would be insufficient mechanism to prevent regular births and ignores very deliberate *cultural* and *technological* practices in hunter-gatherer societies like contraception, infanticide, and lengthy postpartum sex taboos, as well as more the complex mechanisms of practices that suppress puberty, fertility, or ovulation (eg longer periods of breastfeeding).

Since hunter-gatherers didn't try to shit out as many child slaves as possible and indeed were strongly culturally oriented around parental full attention on one child for as long as possible, then the transition to agricultural modes deserves an explicit analysis. What cultural shifts were likely as a consequence of the neolithic revolution? Were they likely — in the absence of a yoke — to immediately abandon a nurture model of childrearing and shift to a slave model? Perhaps if the prompt for the revolution was purely environmental catastrophe, but if the environmental prompts were much slower or lighter we might instead see the neolithic revolution as being a shifting of cognitive complexity towards the production of lasting and more significantly networked culture.

One might choose to waste less cognitive overhead mapping distinct food networks, and instead embrace some simpler work habits because it frees up more cognition to invent and create. The labor may have been more arduous in specific ways, but we have hardly any reason to believe individuals were under as immense survival pressures as in the ages of agricultural serfdom.

There is no reason in this context to expect a shift of parental relations to children into the slave model. And thus no reason to assume a population explosion to match the resources they had available.

Scott talks at length about how disease possibly could have had a huge role in constant population winnowing, but he admits it's all deeply speculative, without archeological evidence. But the very malthusian problem he just assumes to be present is deeply suspect.

To be clear, there is not — that I'm yet aware of — definitive archaeological evidence to support either Scott's or my hypothesis. There may yet be some uncovered — disease and youth coddling are conceivably discernible in bone records — but in the absence of strong empirical data from that era we're left with a question: *Do you think that stateless crop-raising humans are likely to treat children as slaves and thus reproduce malthusian population growth? Or are they more likely to turn any abundance inward upon their existing offspring?*

Scott cites Richard Lee's contemporary studies between the !Kung and contemporary farming societies, but given that contemporary farming cultures are post thousands of years of contact with and shaping by widespread statism such a comparison would be completely irrelevant to evaluations of the original pre-state farming societies.

No one disputes that sedentary societies — much less mass societies — provide greater opportunity for disease, and that imbalanced diets as well as concentrated food supplies can emphasize this. But disease rolls in waves rather than as a consistent population suppressant and was even more of a problem for later societies whose populations skyrocketed. Not to mention — if we're making comparisons to modern farming societies — plague is hardly the omnipresent catastrophic population suppressant he makes it out to be. Scott correctly points out some limitations and frailties to early sedentary farming societies, but he treats them as such extreme barriers that he can only claim the explosion of such lifestyles and infrastructure is “a miracle.”

I'd rather not have to appeal to miracles.

The supposed correlation between the onset of agricultural practices and child maximization for use as slaves is suspect at best. It would take a lot to shake cultural practices of high individual-investment childrearing and re-conceptualize our relation to our offspring as slaves rather than comrades. It would take, in short, something like a state.

And Scott is quite detailed about how states aggressively controlled their populations and saw them as property to be maximized. Having additional children as an early agriculturalist may not have provided more assistance or less precarity, but having additional children definitely provided the state with more conscripted soldiers and raw slaves.

In a context of raw and unending raiding wars there's a very intense pressure upon state entities to maximize the number of children AND shrink how much they each get down to subsistence levels. Thus does the emergence of states necessarily create and depend upon the emergence of a radically new culture or way of relating to our children. Political power has long depended critically upon ageist justifications of parental power. Early states emerged as pillaging engines, gangs at war that offered a protection racket almost certainly closely aligned with culturally pre-existing hierarchies of elder and parental power. And when your children are being press-ganged into service with small survival odds it actually does make some sense to have more children so that you don't outlive all of them. Thus does a relatively compassionate — if still deeply problematic — relationship provide its own internal rationale for a cultural shift to shitting out as many kids as possible. And it's easy to imagine how this would have shifted over time to an orientation more and more alienated from and dictatorial over one's progeny. When

you have lots of kids left over in a time of relative peace you just honestly have less time for each one. When you have more mouths to feed you risk becoming more resentful of the care you are culturally and taxationally pushed to provide and expect more stark recompense for it.

It seems very likely that the macroscopic phenomenon of the rise of states — massive engines of slavery — was inextricable from changes in the culture and psychology of parenting. Arising simultaneously in feedback loops of dehumanization and hierarchy worshipping.

In this sense is the broader culture of statism directly the culture of malthusianism, adult supremacy, and patriarchy.

Scott explicitly covers tax breaks given by early states for the production of more children and refers to states as “population machines,” and yet his failure to tie these things together is jarring. Early states were engines of systematized rape, extending the pillaging of earlier war tribes to structured and cataloged systems that saw women as capital for making more slaves. Scott even talks about how populations will generally adamantly refuse to produce a surplus unless forced by states. Scott is of course talking in terms of food (and commodity) production but why doesn't he extend this to children? Why would a stateless sedentary agricultural population work to produce surplus children? Especially with the severe cost and risk this bore upon women — who we must remember are fucking people and before systematic enslavement probably had goddamn priorities and desires beyond an existence as breeding stock, not to mention usually some access to herbal contraceptives. Surely malthusianism is an unreasonable default characteristic of humans and was likely imposed.

I harp on this point so strongly because Scott's book — unlike Gelderloos' — largely avoids cultural or psychological analysis. Thus the systems of adult supremacy that choke our world and underpin myriad forms of power go almost entirely unconsidered. But also because such a lens creates strong reasons to doubt that early agriculturalists were as miserable as Scott implies.

I think this matters because this narrative of agriculture being terrible implies a lack of agency on the part of early humans as well generally curtails the space of the possible, implying that one of the most radical revolutions in human history was entirely a mistake. I'm not a huge fan of historical agricultural forms or even purely sedentary life — my residual primitivist instincts run too deep — but I think it's worth charitably reading some agency into the early sedentary peoples.

Scott uses the low population growth of these societies as a case against them, to imply that life must have been just above survival, a destitute and desperate affair that could only have been foisted upon them through short-sightedness and catastrophic environmental pressures.

I think this is false, I think that people have hungers beyond food, and will demonstrably fight time after time to accumulate together in great numbers for the benefits of knowledge, cultural complexity, and choice in one's relationships.

I think our hunter-gatherer ancestors settled, closely clustering tribes with one another in the wetlands and delta regions, because they *wanted* to. Because of the rich diversity of resources available not just at one's fingers but through waterway trade. But the food they found most nutritious was *culture*. I think humans hunger for cognitive complexity and consequence to our actions. Graeber covered this in his recent book *Bullshit Jobs*, referencing the piling psychological data that people hunger profoundly for our actions to have consequences, to expand our agency outward into the world. I think this need for choice, for the positive freedom to act and to change things, drove an explosion of culture in the regions where humans settled in large numbers close together. And that these people were unwilling to give up the nutrition of that richly buildable

and consequential cognitive complexity, even to the point of enslaving their bodies in repetitive tasks rather than spending their mind on the complex considerations of hunting instead.

As hunter-gatherers we were brilliant scientists, but we were nodes locked in a complex network we had little to no say in. And so we warped and mutilated our world with fire and countless other inventions, trying to have as big of an impact as we could, to extend our reach beyond our arms. When we had the opportunity to more densely settle in towns of thousands in rich wetlands we not only leaped at the chance, we became our own ecosystems. Cambrian explosions of the meme, even while we warped the land to collapse diversity of the gene.

Scott emphasizes again and again the exponential advantages to communicative diseases with population increases, but the same is true for mental diseases — otherwise known as art, science, and the like. Because what good are humans — lumbering oaf like creatures — if not as carriers for ideas, experiences, dreams, and aspirations?

Civilization is literally ‘the culture of cities.’ The explosive ecosystem of wild new lifeforms whose evolution speeds forward at dizzying paces far beyond the stunted evolution of material biological beings confined to gene changes over generations. A rich and complicated niche only made possible by the accumulation of large numbers of humans.

It is an ecosystem full of unparalleled monsters and mutualism, vastly different forces and conflicts, but it is an ecosystem that will fight to survive. That will — unless it matures soon — continue burning down the planet that its host meatsacks still depend upon.

Accounts like that of James C. Scott would largely paint thought and culture out of the picture, would reduce it to merely a reactive role, responding to environmental conditions and pressures. *Against the Grain* is a relatively materialist account, of the sort that can’t help but diminish thought and culture, to see it as a kind of static noise overlaid over deeper shaping structures. There are of course important and critical influences played by material conditions, by the structures of technologies, by the limits of computation in the face of complexity. But what you risk missing with such a lens is literally everything else.

Malthusianism reduces people to unthinking bacteria, to rabbits without the foresight to consider the carrying capacity of their environment. Today much of the anticiv discourse depends upon notions of inevitability, historical forces that we are powerless in the face of, that we must simply run and scurry from. But malthusianism turned out to be utterly and profoundly wrong. It was a simplistic induction of structure from a limited dataset, it assumed people were simpler than they really are. That all that culture, ethics, ideology, and philosophy stuff was just empty meaningless flak that could be ignored. It turned out instead that their model was empty.

I encounter such thinking throughout anticiv and green milieus. Great big abstractions and narratives like “civilization” or claims about the inevitability of states from agriculture are taken to be cold hard realities, whereas the wild jumble of ideas and desires that permeate human life are seen as toothless spectres. The reverse is often true. The world is not determined by giant molochian demons striding above us, impregnable and deterministic. The world is far richer and more complicated. Civilization is not merely a bunch of unthinking rabbits responding blindly to environmental pressures and a chain of unforeseen consequences grinding out inexorably, but a site of dazzlingly rich conflict, between tendencies like freedom and power, complexity and simplicity, always present in human life, but scaled up. The stakes doubled and doubled again, compounding gravely but also with great promise.

This wild unruly project we call civilization, the *culture* of cities, has unleashed incredible freedom and incredible oppression, locked in ever more complicated tangles around countless

particulars. When we assume that one tendency innately has the driver's seat we blind ourselves to myriad opportunities to influence history ourselves, or just to identify and strike at weak points.

In his best moments Scott explicitly recognizes this, and as I say his account is far more accurate and nuanced than prior popular narratives. But in his pushback to those high school textbook style narratives I worry he creates momentum for a similarly un-nuanced anticiv narrative. So I do want to intervene against that reading.

Every time I write on this topic there is obstinate irritation in some quarters at my use of the term "civilization" to mean something other than Perlman's Leviathan. But I think it's very important to contest whether "civilization" actually represents anything remotely like the power structures of the state. What is at stake is everything the forces of freedom have struggled for and won in the long battlefield of civilization.

The greatest anarchist victory in history is cosmopolitanism, the expansion of our circle of care to strangers, to other species. It has long been a central term to the conflicts over "anticiv." Those who stridently oppose "mass societies" because "humans were not made to care about or deal with strangers" have always been prominent in primitivist and anticiv discourse, coming to a repulsive head with Individuals Tending Towards Savagery, their murders and bombings explicitly intended to revoke and declare war on universalistic compassion.

Such widening empathetic horizons are deeply enmeshed with city culture. Indeed they are quite arguably synonymous with it. It is — if anything — those who sought to turn peacefully trading settlements into engines of raiding that represent the forces or tendencies opposed to civilization, attempting to devour and digest it.

We can even speculate of it being the "barbarians" that brought the state into existence. As stateless civilization spread so did militant raiding cultures of outsiders emerge in reaction — abandoning more complex hunter-gatherer pathways for a specialization in raiding the wealth that accumulated in sedentary societies. Rich knowledge of ecosystems withering in favor of the very simplistic focus of warfare.

Raiding is such a distinct specialization that it seems a little counterintuitive to me that sedentary agriculturalists would smoothly turn to it. Raiding looks more like a smooth extension of hunting than horticulture, and as Scott points out it often is. Might it be instead those still enmeshed in the hunting and then raiding orientation that helped develop warfare? Might in fact it be the parasites who refused to partake in the mutualism and cosmopolitanism of sedentary settlements that founded the state form?

We know that there was crossover between settled and nomadic raiding populations. Scott primarily focuses on this in terms of instances of escape from the city core and enslavement back into it once states had overtaken cities. But we obviously also know many instances of raiding societies deciding to set up permanent shop in the states they raided. Why wouldn't the same thing have happened to cities prior to the emergence of states?

And doesn't this seem like the most reasonable genesis for state behavior?

While he avoids considering them as sources of primordial state genesis I was pleased that Scott indeed brought up the close parallels between raiders and states:

*"Raiders are most likely to adjust their strategy to something that looks more like a "protection racket." ...In extracting a sustainable surplus from sedentary communities*



*and fending off external attacks to protect its base, a stable protection racket like this is hard to distinguish from the archaic state itself.”*

Gelderloos has mapped many pathways in which more recent societies can be tracked tiering up into administrative hierarchies, and no doubt there are many many dangers to watch out for. But it’s worth noting that the more concrete examples we have available take place in the cultural shadow and influence of thousands of years of state societies.

Early agricultural settlements required a great degree of voluntary collaboration; enslavement certainly wasn’t an option for the initial populations that still retained hunter-gatherer skills. It is reasonable to expect an egalitarian culture, one of expansive circles of care, to overcome suspicions of strangers beyond Dunbar’s number. We see seemingly peaceful, egalitarian, and stateless city societies throughout the archaeological record from Çatalhöyük to Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, often with rich trade networks. How does city culture or even just sedentary grain culture suddenly shift to brutally othering outsiders much less their own children? The state has always been first and foremost an engine of warfare, taxation, and slavery. What does that look like? It looks like the raiding culture of some nomadic societies, indeed a subset of hunter-gatherer communities throughout history, but with the power of entire cities under their heel.

I’m not saying that this is necessarily the case. Humans are unbelievably complicated, history is richly contingent, probably literally everything that could happen did happen, including the endogenous formation of states within city societies. But the very plausible counter-narrative I present here should give us pause.

I’m hardly unaware of the history of how narratives around “civilization” and “savages” have been weaponized by the most vicious and genocidal forces in human history, to unparalleled atrocities. We have every reason to be suspicious and to instinctively want to flip the narrative entirely. But the risk of rhetorical misuse shouldn’t blind us. If indeed states do not have that strong of claim to “city culture” we cannot afford to slapdashedly conflate them, or to obscure the distinct roots of the transition to states, of the *culture* of states. We should recognize that even if it means the loss of simple rhetorical narratives, it opens up more possibility for resistance if statism is a cultural strain in some real sense alien to and parasitic on the city, on the culture of mass settlements and agriculture. A cultural strain that has in many ways consumed many hosts and zombified others, but one that is nevertheless not synonymous with its hosts.

The outbreak known as fascism in the last century has been illuminating in that it revealed the deep hostility that power feels to cosmopolitanism, compassion for the stranger, and positive sum collaboration. The tools it used it also openly despised and resented.

As anarchists we are all intensely aware of how our projects are inevitably co-opted by systems of power. They raid us of our ideas and insights, take our unruly fire and try to harness it to better drive their engines. But this is not without tension on their part — they do this because they are *forced* to adopt and consume our projects lest they become overrun or defanged against them. It is disheartening for us, but this process of appropriation and consumption is the nature of our struggle. The question is whether our projects give them indigestion, infect, and undermine them, or whether our fire is enslaved and repurposed.

In this, civilization is a race.

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