

Community Reading Group Annotations

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Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States

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CRG

Quotes

“Wherever humans and fire were at work sculpting the landscape for hunting-and-gathering convenience, few nutrient-poor "climax" forests were allowed to develop. We are nowhere near the oxen, the plough, and the tame livestock of the domus, but we are nevertheless looking at a systematic intensification of landscape and resource management of massive proportions that predates by hundreds of millennia the actual cultivation of fully domesticated crops and pastoralism. Unlike optimal foraging theory that takes the disposition of the natural world as given and asks how a rational actor would distribute his or her efforts in procuring food, what we have here is a deliberate disturbance ecology in which hominids create, over time, a mosaic of biodiversity and a distribution of desirable resources more to their liking ... Seeing the concentration of resources in this light places the milestones of the classical civilizational narrative - the domestication of plants and animals - in a new light as elements among many in a longue-duree continuum of ever-more-elaborate niche construction.” (40)

“Why, one might well ask, were the wetland origins of early sedentary villages and early urbanism overlooked? In part, of course, this is due to the older narrative of civilizations arising from the irrigation of arid lands, a narrative that fit with the contemporary landscape that those formulating the narrative were observing. I believe, however, that the larger context of this historical myopia comes from the nearly indelible association of civilization with the major grains - wheat, barley, rice, maize. (Think of the "amber waves of grain" in "America the Beautiful.") Within this perspective, swamps, marshes, fens, and wetlands generally have been seen as the mirror image of civilization - as a zone of untamed nature, a trackless waste, dangerous to health and safety. The work of civilization, when it came to marshes, was precisely to drain them and transform them into orderly, productive grain fields and villages. Civilizing arid lands mean irrigating them; civilizing swamps means draining them; the goal in each case is making arable grain lands ... [throughout the world] the state has endeavored to turn ungovernable wetlands into taxable grain fields by reengineering the landscape” (55-56)

“A last and more speculative reason for the obscurity of wetland societies is that they were, and remained, environmentally resistant to centralization and control from above. They were based on what are now called "common property resources" - free-living plants, animals, and aquatic creatures to which the entire community had access. There was no single dominant resource that could be monopolized or controlled from the center, let alone easily taxed. Subsistence in these zones was so diverse, variable, and dependent on such a multitude of tempos as to defy any simple central accounting. Unlike the early states that we will examine later, no central authority could monopolize - and therefore ration - access to arable land, grain, or irrigation water. There was, therefore, little evidence of any hierarchy in such communities (as usually measured by differential grave goods). A culture might well develop in such areas, but the likelihood was small that such an intricate web of relatively egalitarian settlements would throw up great chiefs or kingdoms, let alone dynasties.” (57)

“One line of theorizing, favored for a time among students of social evolution, depicted agriculture as a crucial civilizational leap because it was a "delayed-return" activity. The cultivator, it asserted, is a qualitatively new person because he must look far ahead in preparing a field for sowing, then must weed and tend the crop as it matures, until (he hopes) it yields a crop. What is wrong - radically so, in my view - is not so much its depiction of the agriculturalist as its caricature of hunter-gatherers. It suggests, by the implied contrast, that the hunter-gatherer is an improvident, spontaneous creature of impulse, coursing the landscape in hope of stumbling on game or finding something good to pluck from a bush or tree ("immediate return"). Nothing could be farther from the truth.” (65)

Scott Ch. 2

- In Chapter 2, Scott recapitulates his critique of the standard narrative: There simply is no evidence for a decisive moment where hunter-gatherer tribes *advanced* into agrarian societies. Agrarian elements existed for thousands of years before sedentism. The progressive logic of the standard narrative is thus wrong.
- Until recently, this “missing link” bolstered the popularity of the backs-to-the-wall thesis, which posits that food scarcity must have forced populations into agrarian lifestyles. Again, Scott explains, the evidence for this is scant at best. In fact, early states formed in regions with a wide abundance of resources. Thus, instead of asking *why* farming became dominant, it is more compelling to explore *what* the qualitative consequences of farming were for humans. **(Page 73)**
- For Scott, to truly domesticate an organism means that its existence and evolution is entirely dependent on human behaviors. We should understand the domus, then, as a “module” for a certain kind of evolution. **(Page 75-76)**
- In the domus, cultigens entered into an entirely new “life world” relatively free of the evolutionary pressures they faced in the wild. In contrast, they were subject to new pressures, not only imposed by human interests but also by the whole new microenvironment. The “domus effect,” Scott argues, ushered in unprecedented physiological and behavioral transformations for both domesticates and commensals. And this had the paradoxical effect of lengthening the reproductive lives of each while—through multispecies crowding—doubling the mortality rate. The domus created a contradictory space that both optimized the conditions for life while also subjecting it to deadlier pressures seldom found in the wild. Scott therefore asks: To what degree was this also true for humans?
- Bone records show that many of the deficiencies associated with domesticated animals—repetitive stress injuries, loss in bone mass, and nutritional deficits—are found among human remains (especially among women). Albeit not conclusive, there is a strong argument that the domus amplified a self-domestication process for humans; however, Scott concedes, it is entirely speculative to what degree. Whatever the case may be the popular narrative that it is humans who initiated the domestication process is quite problematic; it was more like a two-way street. As such, the late Neolithic period had significant consequences for humanity.
- The first implication of sedentism is that it represented a slow devolution of environmental knowledge. Single crop cultivation detached bands of people from the seasonal rhythms that once made-up a nomadic ecological knowledgebase. Second, the repetition of tasks associated with crop field cultivation narrowed the diversity of food-procuring skills available to a single individual. Third, daily patterns became far more regimented *and* gendered as different tasks were structured around the harvest. The domus’ qualitative implications for humanity therefore was to dislocate, deskill, and discipline it, Scott estimates. **(Page 91)**
- Recognizing this evaluation may be overly critical he concludes:
“If this is a too bleak view of a breakthrough credited with making civilization possible, let us at least say that it represented a contraction of our species' attention to and practical knowledge of the natural world, a contraction of diet, a contraction of space, and perhaps a contraction, as well, in the breadth of ritual life.” **(92)**

Ch. 2 Quotes

“Whatever the reasons for the growing reliance on domesticated grains and animals for subsistence, it represented a qualitative change in landscape modification. The cultivars were transformed; the livestock was transformed; the soils and fodder they depended on were transformed; and, not least, *Homo sapiens* was transformed. Here the term "domestication" - from "domus," or household - needs to be taken rather literally. The domus was a unique and unprecedented concentration of tilled fields, seed and grain stores, people, and domestic animals, all coevolving with consequences no one could have possibly foreseen. Just as important, the domus as a module of evolution was irresistibly attractive to literally thousands of uninvited hangers-on who thrived in its little ecosystem. At the top of the heap were the so-called commensals: sparrows, mice, rats, crows, and (quasi-invited) dogs, pigs, and cats for which this new Ark was a veritable feedlot. Each of these commensals in turn brought along its own train of microparasites - fleas, ticks, leeches, mosquitoes, lice, and mites -as well as their predators; the dogs and cats were there in large part for the mice, rats, and sparrows. Not a single critter emerged from its sojourn at the late-Neolithic multispecies resettlement camp unaffected.” (73)

“The purpose of the cultivated field and of the garden is precisely to eliminate most of the variables that would compete against the cultigen. In this man-made and -defended environment- other flora, exterminated for a time by fire, flood, plough, and hoe, pulled out by their roots; birds, rodents, and browsers scared off or fenced out - we make a nearly ideal world in which our favorites, perhaps carefully watered and fertilized, will flourish. Steadily, by coddling, we create a fully domesticated plant. "Fully domesticated" means simply that it is, in effect, our creation; it can no longer thrive without our attentions. In evolutionary terms a fully domesticated plant has become a superspecialized floral "basket case," and its future is entirely dependent on our own. If it ceases to please us, it will be banished and almost certainly will perish.” (75-76)

“These meticulous, demanding, interlocked, and mandatory annual and daily routines, I would argue, belong at the center of any comprehensive account of the "civilizing process." They strap agriculturalists to a minutely choreographed routine of dance steps; they shape their physical bodies, they shape the architecture and layout of the domus; they insist, as it were, on a certain pattern of cooperation and coordination. In that sense, to pursue the metaphor, they are the background musical beat of the domus. Once *Homo sapiens* took that fateful step into agriculture, our species entered an austere monastery whose taskmaster consists mostly of the demanding genetic clockwork of a few plants and, in Mesopotamia particularly, wheat or barley.” (91)

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Chapters 3 & 4 Summary & Quotes

- Part of appreciating Chapter 3 requires that we recall the myths left to us by the standard narrative of agrarian civilization, namely that such settlements were an overall improvement in the living conditions of humans and that they were relatively stable and self-sufficient communities. The major fallacy here is that most early humans *chose* to live in sedentary communities. The archeo-botanical and archeological evidence contradicts this account. Tremendous labor went into protecting crops and livestock from destructive weeds and predators. Moreover, multispecies settlements attracted all types of pests who fed on plants, feces, and dead animals. These pests in turn brought parasites and diseases that jumped from species to species. Disease was a constant devastating part of agrarian life, especially because the diets of sedentary people were relatively limited compared to their nomadic counterparts, which left them generally malnourished. As such, evidence suggests that early settlements were routinely subject to abandonment or collapse. Early agrarian society was neither healthier nor stable. (112 -113)
- As was discussed in earlier chapters, one of the consequences of domestication is that women's reproductive lifespans were increased overall. In addition, logistically speaking, childrearing is far easier in sedentary communities than in nomadic tribes in which people are routinely moving. Therefore, agrarian settlements were at once a boon to fertility rates while simultaneously a perfect storm of disease. This explains the general population bottleneck that researchers observe in remains dating to the early to mid-Neolithic, Scott argues. However, by the late Neolithic, an apparent stabilization of epidemics suggests that eventually early settlements achieved immunological defenses that allowed sedentary populations to overtake the nomadic peoples at their margins. The reproductive value of domestication, therefore, suggests that agrarian societies' dominance by the late Neolithic does not reflect a natural predilection for sedentary life but rather a demographic accident. (114)
- However population booms do not necessarily explain why certain areas turned towards sedentism. So what were the commonalities between the earliest known urban centers that can explain their sudden rise? This is the main question of Chapter 4. From the available evidence, the alluvial ecological niches in which all known early civilizations took shape in Mesopotamia, Asia, and Central America were not sufficient for state formation alone. In many ecologically similar and populated parts of the world, human beings did not turn towards sedentism. However, one commonality all these early states share is a governing body entirely structured around a grain mono-crop. In short, grain cultivation makes states possible. (129)
- And this entails, Scott states, that we understand what it is about grains specifically that make them so amenable to state-formation. He speculates that the answers are taxes and the appropriation of labor. (129 – 130)
- Grain crop, where the maturation-time and approximate yield-size of a field is estimable, allowed for techniques of quantification to be developed and exploited through mandates. In other words, mono-crop agriculture allowed for *the rationalization of space* (my formulation) that we associate with statecraft. (131)

- Grain thus allowed for life itself to subject to forces of abstraction that exercised the authority of early elites. The technology of writing, for example, was used entirely in a bureaucratic vein for hundreds of years before representing what we call literature, Scott notes. As such, the cultural triumphs we associate with the turn towards agrarian society are, in effect, a product of a deeper history of techniques of the appropriation of labor, Scott concludes. (144)

“The older narrative of civilizational progress is, in one basic respect, undoubtedly correct. The domestication of plants and animals made possible a degree of sedentism that did form the basis of the earliest civilizations and states and their cultural achievements. It rested, however, on an extremely slender and fragile genetic foundation: a handful of crops, a few species of livestock, and a radically simplified landscape that had to be constantly defended against a reconquest by excluded nature. At the same time, the domus was never even remotely self-sufficient. It required a constant subsidy, as it were, from that excluded nature ... In a famine, farmers resorted to all the extradomus resources that hunter-gatherers relied on ... The domus was at the same time a veritable feast and a pilgrimage site for uninvited commensals and pests large and small, down to the smallest viruses. Its very concentration and simplicity made it uniquely vulnerable to collapse. Late Neolithic agriculture was the first of many steps in the development of special techniques for maximizing the production of a small number of preferred plant and animal species. An illness - of crops, livestock, or people - a drought, excessive rains, a plague of locusts, rats, or birds, could bring the whole edifice down ... Based on a narrow food web, Neolithic agriculture was far more productive, in a concentrated way, but also far more fragile than hunting and gathering or even shifting-cultivation ...” (112 -113)

“Given the disease burden of agrarian society and its fragility, the demographic "advantage" of farmers over hunter-gatherers might have been quite small. But the thing to remember in this context is that over a period of five thousand years - like the "miracle" of compound interest - the eventual difference became massive. For example, if one computes doubling times for different rates of reproduction, it turns out that an annual rate of 0.014 percent doubles population in five thousand years while a rate of 0.028 percent, still minuscule, doubles population in half that time (twenty-five hundred years), and, of course, doubles again to a total four times as great after five thousand years. Given enough time, the small reproductive advantage of farmers was overwhelming.” (114)

“The subsistence bases of all the earliest, major agrarian states of antiquity - Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus Valley, Yellow River - bear a remarkable resemblance to one another. They are all grain states ... In a grain state, one or two cereal grains provided the main food starch, the unit of taxation in kind, and the basis for a hegemonic agrarian calendar. Such states were confined to the ecological niches where alluvial soils and available water made them possible. [In concert with Lucien Febvre’s concept of “possibilism”: While wetlands were ideal contexts for the formation of states, they were not by themselves the determinant factor in their creation.] And in this case, population concentration must be distinguished from state making; wetlands abundance, as we have seen, could lead to incipient urbanism and commerce, but did not lead to state formation without grain growing on a large scale.” (129)

“The key to the nexus between grains and states lies, I believe, in the fact that only the cereal grains can serve as a basis for taxation: visible, divisible, assessable, storable, transportable, and "rationable." Other crops - legumes, tubers, and starch plants - have some of these desirable state-adapted qualities, but none has all of these advantages. To appreciate the unique advantages of the cereal grains, it helps to place yourself in the sandals of an ancient tax- collection official interested, above all, in the ease and efficiency of appropriation.” (129 -130)

The "aboveground" simultaneous ripening of cereal grains has the inestimable advantage of being legible and assessable by the state tax collectors. These characteristics are what make wheat, barley, rice, millet, and maize the premier political crops. A tax assessor typically classifies fields in terms of soil quality and, knowing the average yield of a particular grain from such soil, is able to estimate a tax. If a year-to-year adjustment is required, fields can be surveyed and crop cuttings taken from a representative patch just before harvest to arrive at an estimated yield for that particular crop year. As we shall see, state officials

tried to raise crop yields and taxes in kind by mandating techniques of cultivation; in Mesopotamia this included insisting on repeated ploughing to break up the large clods of earth and repeated harrowing for better rooting and nutrient delivery. The point is that with cereal grains and soil preparation, the planting, the condition of the crop, and the ultimate yield were more visible and assessable.” (131)

“The entire exercise in early state formation is one of standardization and abstraction required to deal with units of labor, grain, land, and rations. Essential to that standardization is the very invention of a standard nomenclature, through writing, of all the essential categories - receipts, work orders, labor dues, and so on. The creation and imposition of a written code throughout the city-state replaced vernacular judgments and was itself a distance-demolishing technology that held sway throughout the small realm. Labor standards were developed for such tasks as ploughing, harrowing, or sowing. Something like "work points" were created, showing credits and debits in work assignments. Standards of classification and quality were specified for fish, oil, and textiles – which were differentiated by weight and mesh. Livestock, slaves, and laborers were classified by gender and age. In embryonic form, the vital statistics of an appropriating state aiming to extract as much value as possible from its land and people is already in evidence.” (144)

Chapter 5 Summary & Quotes

- In Chapter 5, Scott adds depth to the meaning of his term “multispecies resettlement camp.” Many late Neolithic agrarian settlements were, in all probability, forced work camps, he argues. People, the spoils of war, were forcibly uprooted and moved closer to the state in order work fields, which in some instances may have been abandoned due to escape or outbreaks. Therefore, a fuller and more sinister picture of “agrarian society” comes into view in Chapter 5. (173, 177–178)
- Politically speaking, Scott contends that slavery had a dual function in early states: Forced labor supplied the necessary resources required to sustain a large centralized governing body while mitigating the risk of rebellion or abandonment by its subjects. Therefore, while it did not invent slavery, the city-state may have been the first to systematize coerced labor on a mass scale. As discussed in prior chapters, the routine epidemic these resettlement camps were subject to made population retention a constant problem for the state. For this reason, female slaves were particularly prized for both their capacity for work but also to bear children. In the hands of the early state, slavery was in large part an effort to control the reproductive value of certain populations of people. And it is therefore tempting, Scott explains, to consider this early rationalized slavery as an elaboration of domestication generally. (180–181)
- A provocative idea that I think Scott suggests – and would be in keeping with this more expansive idea of domestication as a dual movement – is that patriarchal social organization is as much an *effect* of the efforts to take control of reproductive value as it is a method to *secure* it. (181)
- What do you all think?

“Despite the relative absence of hard evidence on the extent of slavery in Mesopotamia ... one is tempted to speculate that the slave sector erected over the grain module in the early states was, even if of modest size, an essential component in the creation of a powerful state. The pulses of captive slaves alleviated many of the manpower needs of an otherwise demographically challenged state ... If such states had had to extract such labor exclusively from their own core subjects, they would have run a high risk of provoking flight or rebellion - or both.” (173)

“Mass deportation and forced settlement was, in the neo-Assyrian Empire, systematically applied to conquered areas. The entire population and livestock of the conquered land were marched from the territory at the periphery of the kingdom to a location closer to the core ... what was distinctive about deportation and forced settlement was that the bulk of the captive community was kept intact and moved to a site where its production could be more easily monitored and appropriated. Here, the manpower and grain-centralizing machine is at work but at a wholesale level, taking entire agrarian communities as modules and placing them at the service of the state ... Officials conducted elaborate inventories of the captured populations - their possessions, their skills, their livestock and were charged with provisioning them en route to their new location with a minimum of losses. In some cases, it seems that the captives were

resettled on land abandoned earlier by other subjects, implying that forced mass resettlement may have been part of an effort to compensate for mass exoduses or epidemics.” (177-178)

“[States] did not invent slavery and human bondage; they could be found in innumerable prestate societies. What states surely did invent, however, are large-scale societies based systematically on coerced, captive human labor ... the role of captive labor and slavery was so vital and strategic to the maintenance of state power that it is difficult to imagine these states persisting long without it. What if we were to examine slavery, agrarian war captives, helots, and the like as state projects to domesticate a class of human servitors ... The captives, individually and collectively, became an integral part of the state's means of production and reproduction, a part, if you will, along with the livestock and grain fields of the state's own domus.” (180-181)

“Take the question of reproduction. At the very center of domestication is the assertion of human control over [reproduction], which entails confinement and a concern for selective breeding and rates of reproduction. In wars for captives, the strong preference for women of reproductive age reflects an interest at least as much in their reproductive services as in their labor ... A combination of property in land, the patriarchal family, the division of labor within the domus, and the state's overriding interest in maximizing its population has the effect of domesticating women's reproduction in general.” (181)