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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Brimnes, N. (2019). The earliest states, high modernist states and the importance of intermediaries. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46(4), 867-871. DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2019.1609775

Publication metadata

Title:	The earliest states, high modernist states and the importance of intermediaries
Author(s):	Niels Brimnes
Journal:	The Journal of Peasant Studies
DOI/Link:	10.1080/03066150.2019.1609775
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:4, published online 4. June, 2019, <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03066150.2019.1609775>

The Earliest States, High Modernist States and the Importance of Intermediaries

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History at its best, in my view, is the most subversive discipline, inasmuch as it can tell us how things that we are likely to take for granted came to be.

James C. Scott, 2017, pp. 3-4

It was with a certain degree of hesitance I accepted the invitation from the *Journal of Peasant Studies* to write a review essay on *Against the Grain*. The obvious reason for my reluctance was that the subject of *Against the Grain*, the Neolithic revolution and the emergence of the earliest states in the Mesopotamian alluvium is about as far removed from my own fields of specialization as anything could be. At the same time, however, I was both excited and honoured to receive the invitation. I rate Scott's work highly as a source of inspiration for my own explorations into the history of public health and disease control in modern India. In the end, my desire to enter into a dialogue with Scott prevailed over my awareness of being unable to say anything significant about developments in ancient Mesopotamia.

Let me explain why I think I can discuss Scott's work without elaborating on agriculture and statecraft in the third millennium BC. I am an historian who began studying cultural encounters in early colonial India, continued to explore the introduction of 'western' medicine during colonial rule, and ended up writing about post WWII disease control programmes in India and beyond. My engagement with Scott's extensive work is quite

narrowly focused around *Seeing Like a State*. I find that this book offers an excellent analytic frame for understanding the high modernist aspirations, dynamics, and eventual disappointments of the grandiose disease control schemes set up by the post-colonial Indian state in unison with WHO and UNICEF in the 1950s and 1960s. My contribution is, therefore, a reading of *Against the Grain* from the perspective of someone who works with – and sometimes against – *Seeing Like a State*.¹

It might also be worth noting that it is a reading of *Against the Grain* from someone who has lived most of his life in Denmark, where there is a special affection for the two entities that Scott is problematizing so effectively in *Against the Grain*: agriculture and the state. Denmark built its wealth on agricultural exports, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and today the food and agriculture sector contributes about a quarter of the value of Denmark's export. Having built its wealth on agriculture, the Danes used that wealth to build a welfare state, which commands an unusually high level of trust among its citizens. Everything from health issues to library loans is registered on our national identity number, and many Danes (including myself) can hardly be bothered to check their tax returns. The Danish state has extensive knowledge about its citizens, and the citizens generally believe that the state is benevolent. Scott noticed and pondered over this during a prolonged stay in Denmark in 2015 (while he was writing *Against the Grain*).

Against the Grain is written to question the standard narrative, shared by most of us, assuming that the adoption of agriculture and the emergence of states were major moments of progress in our species history. Having consulted recent advances in disciplines such as archaeology, history, and epidemiology, Scott concludes that we have every reason to believe that non-agrarian people, who had not been subjected to a state, were probably better off than those who tilled the fields in realms controlled by a state. Scott as usual argues his case elegantly, convincingly – even seductively. As noted above, I am not able to identify specific

problems in Scott's interpretation of the earliest history of mankind, but it is certainly a pleasure to read. One obvious benefit is that *Against the Grain* brings insights and debates from relatively narrow circles of specialists to broader audiences of political scientists, anthropologists, and historians, for whom a new publication from James C. Scott is always noted with interest.

How does the earliest state look from the perspective of *Seeing Like a State*? The answer is that it looks familiar, perhaps a little too familiar. Scott has been criticized, by historians and anthropologists, for writing about the state in terms that were too abstract and general (Cooper 2005, 140-42; Herzfeld 2005, 373). This tendency is also discernible in *Against the Grain*, particularly in Chapter Four where he first chooses "walls, tax collection, and officials" as the most important features of the early state (118), and then informs us that the state "virtually everywhere ... maximized the possibilities of appropriation, stratification, and inequality" (122). We are also informed that peasantries "have always understood that the state is a recording, registering, and measuring machine" (139) and that maximizing population was an obsession "in all ancient kingdoms" (142). Finally, "the entire exercise in early state formation" is described as "one of standardization and abstraction required to deal with units of labor, grain, land and rations" (144). This is what the early state is about, across several millennia in China, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley and Egypt. Given the relative paucity of sources dealing with the earliest states, I can accept that it is difficult to get beneath these rather sweeping generalizations. I can even accept that there is some truth in applying these general features to all the early states. What concerns me, however, is that this description of the earliest states has (too) much affinity with the way Scott describes the high-modernist state: a machine that registers, measures and standardizes and where the key figure is the anonymous, loyal 'tax-man'.

My view on generalizations in history and social science is ambiguous. They are always reductive, but they can also be productive. In fact, the books that have been most influential and productive to me are generalizing books. *Seeing like a State* is one example; Edward Said's *Orientalism* is another. The latter is glaringly self-contradictory and grossly simplifies the production of knowledge about the Orient. Yet, it is impossible to find another book written within the last fifty years that has been as stimulating and influential in shaping our view on colonialism and its forms of knowledge. Generalizing books are making interesting, wide-ranging and provocative claims, which those of us who do not have the gift for writing such books are bound to engage in an ambiguous dynamic involving both inspiration and contestation. We will make case studies, which modify or contradict the models set forth in these books, but we would not have been able to make these analyses without them. This is, I think, a very constructive dialectic.

I suppose Scott would agree. Addressing the charge that *Seeing like a State* makes a high modernist argument against high-modernism, he wrote fifteen years ago, "I have always ... reached for the boldest and most striking form of my argument. Only in that fashion is there a sharply defined thesis to evaluate. I have always felt that the reader of my books ought to be in no doubt about what I've said and that a book's thesis ought to be expressible in a couple of paragraphs" (Scott 2005, 399). I find this laudable, and this is perhaps the reason why I find the *Seeing like a State*'s generalized picture of the high modernist state so productive, and *Against the Grain*'s statement that all the early states were basically identical acceptable. But the historian in me finds the suggested familiarity between the earliest states and the high-modernists states of the twentieth century much harder to digest.

I think this has something to do with the subversive power of the discipline of history, as stated by Scott and quoted at the beginning of this essay. The ability to question and de-naturalize "things that we are likely to take for granted" (such as states) is certainly one of the

great strengths of history. But invoking ‘la longue duree’ of the Annales School (Scott 2017, 4) and portraying the earliest states in terms reminiscent of the high modernist states, might not be “history at its best”. Instead of the celebratory narrative that equates state formation with progress and civilization, we get the reductive thesis of continuity: that the state, once consolidated against many odds, was always and simply a standardizing, regulating tax-machine. A more fruitful way of de-naturalizing ‘the state’ is to look for the variety of forms that state-like structures have taken through history. This is why I find the last chapter of *Against the Grain* the most rewarding. Building on insights and arguments from, among others sources, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, it not only challenges the naive master-narrative of state formation as linear progress, it also shows how states and non-state people well into the second millennium AD lived in complex and volatile configurations of raiding, trading and tribute extraction. At times pastoralists would establish themselves as rulers over agrarian states, at others people would voluntarily evade the state and ‘revert’ into ‘secondary primitivism’ through processes of processes of voluntary ‘self-nomadization’ (Scott 2017, 231-34). This is more “history at its best”.

It struck me that what makes the earliest states and their high modernist ‘successors’ resemble each other in Scott’s analytic lens is the absence of *intermediaries*. By intermediaries, I refer to groups serving as links between the sovereign and his subjects, which acted with a significant degree of independence. Even if Scott describes most early states as consisting of “a directly ruled core region, a penumbra of peoples whose incorporation depended on the varying power and wealth of the state, and a zone quite outside its reach” (Scott 2017, 220), he does not pay much attention to intermediary groups that negotiated the relations between the state centre and the tax-paying peasants. In a similar vein, in Scott’s distillation high modernist states did not have intermediaries; instead, they had zealous and loyal bureaucrats. In 2005, Richard Herzfeld took issue with Scott’s

“surprisingly monochromatic treatment of bureaucrats in *Seeing Like a State*”, and suggested they be seen more as ‘power brokers’ than wheels in a well-oiled machine (Herzfeld 2005, 373). My understanding is that Scott pled “guilty to that charge” (Scott 2005, 399). The point is not so much that Scott is wrong in portraying the earliest states without intermediaries. Some of the earliest states might have been too small, or they might not have left sources that can tell us anything about them. This is for others to decide. But he could have looked somewhere else, and found state-like structures more challenging to his generalized model of the state as a uniform, standardizing and regulating tax-machine.

Scott describes *Against the Grain* as a “self-consciously derivative project”, and if he ever feels like making a digression again – and I hope he does – I suggest he looks at the Mughal Empire. Why? Because this is the best example of a complex, multi-layered ‘state’ I have come across (if he prefers to stay closer to the Mesopotamian alluvium, I am sure that a study of the Ottoman Empire would reveal similar insights). Long gone are the days when the Mughal Empire was subsumed under the category of ‘Oriental despotism’, where states were stronger than society and the ruler taxed and regulated as he pleased (Wittfogel 1957).

Today, the Mughal Empire is studied as a decentralized umbrella over a wide variety of power relations. It is understood, in other words, as a state full of intermediaries. C. A. Bayly expressed this revisionist view eloquently in 1988: “The Mughal emperor was *Shah-an-Shah*, ‘king of kings’ rather than king of India. He was the highest manifestation of sovereignty, the final court of appeal ...” (Bayly 1988, 13). The Mughal ‘state’ appears as a multilayered ‘patchwork’ of hierarchical relations: *khalisa* land ruled directly by the imperial household; provinces ruled by *nawabs* (Governors) who gradually built their own bases of power; rotating *jagirdars* who held time-limited taxing right over specific areas (prebendalism in Weberian terms); and locally rooted Hindu *zamindars*, who engaged with and taxed the cultivators according to local usage (Metcalf and Metcalf 2012, 19-20). In a

recent textbook on Indian history, Ishita Banerjee-Dube notes how the centralization of Mughal power rested on “discreet balancing and sharing of rights” among elite groups. She further notes how Mughal state building “left the way open for multiple and rival principles of organization of authority and management. What mattered more over time was Mughal ‘concession’ rather than Mughal centralization” (Banerjee-Dube 2015, 11). The Mughal Empire did indeed look like the “real, diverse, and chaotic old-growth forest” that Scott cherishes in *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998, 15).

Moreover, the historiography of the Mughals contains an illuminating debate about its decline. Explanations range from over-taxation and “endemic state oppression” to the centrifugal forces of economic growth and prosperity in the coastal provinces, most notably Bengal (Bayly 1988, 18-21; Banerjee-Dube 2015, 9-11). The final reason why Scott should have a look at the Mughals is, of course, that they represent one of the configurations of power between mobile non-state people and one of the largest grain producing areas in the world. The Mughal descended from Central Asian pastoralists and claimed descent from both Tamerlane and the Mongols.

I am convinced that a James Scott study of a Mughal-type state would be both challenging and rewarding. Studying the state in the multiple forms it has assumed through history would certainly also be welcomed by those of us (from Denmark and elsewhere), who have invested a good deal of trust in the state, and who are desperately looking for some avatar of the state to help us curb and control the neoliberal juggernaut of global financial capitalism.

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¹ My engagement with Scott's work has also resulted in a thematic issue of the Danish journal *Temp* (edited with Casper Andersen) on the concept of modernity and the urge to modernize. In this issue *Seeing Like State* took center stage. The only English contribution to the issue was an interview with Scott, entitled 'Beyond the high modernist moment' (Brimnes and Andersen 2016).