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Against the grain james c scott sparknotes

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Against the Grain is Scott's latest book, which synthesizes recent research on domestication, sedentism, and state formation. The author draws examples from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, bringing his expertise in thinking about states and non-state areas to the table. The book consists of seven chapters, starting with "The Domestication of Fire, Plants, Animals, and... Us" and ending with "The Golden Age of the Barbarians." The introduction sets out Scott's main ideas and positions, while chapter one delves into the earliest uses of fire by Homo erectus. Scott challenges traditional narratives of the Neolithic revolution, arguing that crop growing did not lead to sedentism, urbanization, or state formation. Instead, agriculture began in rich wetlands rather than arid areas. He notes that both agriculture and animal domestication were incorporated into subsistence skills employed by knowledgeable people aware of their environment and resources. The text highlights the benefits of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, asking why sedentary agro-pastoralism became dominant. Scott doubts arguments from scarcity and population pressure, arguing that deliberate agriculture was avoided for as long as possible. Factors like demographic advantages and pathogens may have tipped the balance toward settled farming. In terms of state formation, Scott views the state as a "more or less proposition" on a continuum rather than an "either/or." He sees walls, tax collection, and other characteristics as indicators of state presence. Scott emphasizes that early states were fragile entities, with many collapsing due to factors such as climate change, over-reliance on irrigation and grains, and the difficulty in maintaining control over populations. He argues that the need for a taxable agricultural surplus led states to exert significant control over people's lives, including the use of slavery and mass deportation. The early writing systems also provide evidence of this focus on grain, taxes, and labor, which may have contributed to their adoption by only certain groups. Furthermore, Scott suggests that the collapse of these early states should not be viewed as a failure, but rather as an opportunity for "emancipation" from oppressive regimes, highlighting the complexity and fragility of human societies even in ancient times. States may have had a negative impact on many people. Archaeology often focuses on sites with grand monuments, material wealth, and artistic objects, which are linked to rulers and elites. These phenomena are typically associated with urban state civilizations that flourished at the expense of the majority who were not wealthy or living in urban areas. This focus is inevitable since archaeology examines what's more visible and valuable in our culture. However, Scott argues that this focus skews perceptions toward the idea that states represent a good thing, an advance on more primitive ways of life. Scott notes that states were a tiny minority of human communities for a long time. He suggests that many non-state people living in their periphery may have deliberately chosen not to form agrarian states. They didn't want to give up their diverse lifestyle for one of drudgery, taxation, and disease. This perspective counterbalances neo-evolutionary views and returns agency to non-state actors. Scott also proposes that the two millennia prior to the development of states might have been a golden age of diverse subsistence strategies and non-state communities. However, he notes how civilizations and non-state "barbarians" initially benefited from each other but eventually became more successful at the expense of their neighbors through the recruitment of mercenaries. The book offers compelling insights into the novel and rare ancient states, which were often unhealthy, oppressive, and fragile. It challenges views that civilization and states are an automatic and desirable good, resulting from progress through multiple discrete stages of development. Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States presents a provocative alternative to the traditional narrative on the emergence of settled societies. James C. Scott challenges the conventional wisdom that humans voluntarily adopted intensive agriculture, instead arguing that people were coerced into living in hierarchical states plagued by malnutrition and disease. The book offers a nuanced perspective on how human civilization came into being, proposing that domestication had far-reaching consequences for both humans and the environment. Scott examines the process of early sedentism, highlighting the gradual transformation of environments through the use of fire and the cultivation of cereal grains. He also explores the concept of adaptability in subsistence strategies, suggesting that it was a more advantageous approach than early agriculture. The author delves into the human impact on the environment, demonstrating how artificial selection has led to significant changes in plant and animal species, often at the expense of their original characteristics. Scott contends that humans have inadvertently instilled irreversible changes by breeding themselves. He speculates that we might have become more docile, oblivious to our surroundings. Moreover, Scott posits that the needs of domesticated plants and animals render us slaves to their precise requirements. In this chapter, Scott emphasizes Agro-Pastoralism, questioning why a hunter-gatherer would opt for subsistence farming over a fulfilling life. He argues that coercion by the state drove the transformation from hunter-gatherer societies to agro-pastoral ones. Scott cites research on Abu Hureyra and concurs with scholars that hunter-gatherers unwillingly adopted agriculture due to environmental pressures. Additionally, early states were plagued by zoonoses, resulting in high morbidity rates. Scott notes that many achievements attributed to the state were present before its formation, and defines a state as characterized by territoriality, tax collection, and officials. The Sumerian city of Uruk serves as an example of how early agriculture required a challenging lifestyle, forcing people to labor under duress. This led to prevalent warfare between rival polities to acquire slave labor or control irrigated areas. Scott claims that "Grains Make States," as the introduction of staple foods allowed for taxation and exploitation. The key to this nexus lies in cereal grains' unique qualities: they are visible, divisible, assessable, storable, transportable, and rationable. This made grains like wheat or rice more valuable than other food sources. By forcing people to pay taxes in grain, rulers incentivized the cultivation of these crops, diverting attention away from preferred food sources. Scott describes early states as population machines, prioritizing the productivity and number of "domesticated" subjects. States demanded that citizens gather near the center of power and produce excess goods beyond their own needs. Scott notes that early states struggled with disease, leading to population decline unless slaves were acquired to replace lost people. To control populations, early states would forcibly settle people on fertile land, then prevent them from fleeing to avoid bondage and labor obligations. Scott cites ancient laws, such as the Code of Hammurabi, which contained six laws aimed at discouraging slave flight and escape. The end result was that states with larger populations often held more power, creating incentives for early states to increase their population and prevent "leakage" through war and bondage. However, Scott sees early states as vulnerable due to self-inflicted issues like climate change, resource depletion, disease, warfare, and migration to areas of greater abundance. He notes that early state-builders had no prior examples to warn them against such problems. Scott argues that academics have viewed state collapse negatively, but in fact, it may have benefited the majority of people involved. Living in early states meant subjection to large-scale warfare and slavery, but historical periods following state collapse might have brought a higher standard of living and freedom. Scott highlights how state collapse led to population dispersion, making food more accessible and freeing people from the brutality of the state and the need to produce surpluses for the elite. He views "barbarian" raiders as having a symbiotic relationship with early states, raiding grain centers but also trading goods from remote areas. Scott theorizes that up until 400 years ago, humanity was in the "Golden Age of the Barbarians," when most people had never seen a tax collector. This was due to the existence of "Barbarian Zones" – vast areas where states found it difficult or impossible to extend their rule. Places like mountains and steppes, uncultivated dense forests, swamps, and deserts were beyond state control, making them military threats to state power. Scott suggests that societies didn't progress linearly from barbarism to civilization. Instead, some "barbarian" communities transitioned into early states and civilizations, while others remained "barbarian." He argues that history is fluid, with some groups reverting back to being "barbarian" due to the failures and excesses of their respective states. Scott's perspective implies that state-making and civilization weren't inevitable or necessarily progressive. People often avoided these developments when possible, highlighting a more complex narrative than one of inexorable march towards progress. Reviews from various outlets showcase a range of perspectives on Scott's work. Steven Mithen notes that Scott's account of the past is more accurate than traditional narratives, implicitly exposing flaws in contemporary political ideas based on human progress and the ideal of the city/nation-state. Scott's new book on grain will solidify his position as a leading expert on stateless societies, connecting history, anthropology, and economics through debates about economic coercion. Against the Grain explores the earliest states' emergence, sparking discussions about civilization's perils and permanence. The work delves into the nuances of state formation, challenging conventional views on social organization and power dynamics. James C. Scott's research offers a fresh perspective on the historical development of societies, shedding light on the complexities surrounding coercion and freedom in early civilizations. Against the Grain by James C. Scott review reveals early roots of elitism, taxation, and slavery. A study explores ancient societies and their transition to statehood.