House has employed SOFs on such a significant scale in recent years is that they provide a convenient means for conducting military operations in numerous countries largely from the shadows. Deploying relatively small contingents of SOFs enables the White House to conduct a perpetual global war on terrorism without engendering much attention (or pushback) from the American public.

There are two risks to such an approach, however. The obsession with low visibility introduces a risk that SOFs will be employed in circumstances for which they are ill-suited and poorly equipped. Even more important, an overreliance on SOFs has the potential to subvert the American political process. The American public has the capacity to act as a powerful brake on ill-conceived military adventures. If a president can sustain a military operation only by hiding the United States’ role from its citizens, one must question the ultimate wisdom of that enterprise. As Moyar suggests, “Presidents, being highly political animals, will continue to face temptations to use special operations forces to serve political agendas. For the good of the republic and the special operations forces, they would be well advised to resist those temptations.”

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**Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States**
James C. Scott

The subsistence farmer of cereal grains has been the most common human type in recorded history. Indeed, the 21st century may be the first recorded century during which subsistence farmers did not predominate. Or so we may hope.

But how did we become subsistence farmers? Recent archaeology suggests that the process was anything but easy and that states played a central role in the necessary subjugation of unruly waters, lands, plants, animals—and people. And a process of subjugation it most certainly was.

Early in recorded history—and in the tantalizing era that came just before it—something momentous took place, something that you probably never learned about in school: the state *invented* and *imposed* the subsistence farming of cereal grains. In the process the
state destroyed a way of life that is barely legible to us anymore, all but lost in the mists of time. Yet that way of life was in many respects superior to what followed. The peoples who were subjected to state power and subsistence fought against these impositions valiantly—and they lost. From that point on, the victorious state took care to keep almost everyone at the level of subsistence, or just below it, by appropriating nearly all the surplus product for itself. Although few of us have even realized it, the farming of cereal grains has been part of a nightmare from which we have all been trying to awake.

The story I’ve just told is highly unconventional, and yet it probably resonates with a certain strain of libertarian, even as it infuriates many others. It is also a very new story, which is why you didn’t learn about it in school.

One place you will learn about it is in James C. Scott’s latest book, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. It tells the story of a complex pattern of grain agriculture, early states, forced labor, and the extraction of surplus, and how all of these things were connected in ways that researchers previously never suspected.

In the conventional story, the one just lately overthrown by new discoveries in the Middle East and elsewhere, the first states had been forces for good. They rode in benignly on a crest of surplus grain and newfound human vigor. States then sponsored benevolent public works, like irrigation projects and cultic sites that celebrated the wonders of grain agriculture—to which humanity had already gravitated on its own. Cities became possible through surplus, and city life was also the creation of the state. With the advent of the state, living conditions improved rather than getting worse.

None of this, though, is altogether sympathetic to libertarians, who have always been critics of the state. And none of it is thought to be well supported by the evidence anymore. Earlier research into the first states, Scott argues, had been too prone to buy those states’ own propaganda, which we must stop doing.

Armed with the latest in satellite and computer-aided archaeology, specialists now declare that the first farmers weren’t always at subsistence. Before recorded history, and before the state, there had been not subsistence farming but flexibility and abundance. For many thousands of years—for longer than recorded history itself—humankind lived on a healthy mix of foraged plants, hunted animals, and low-intensity agricultural crops. Their labor was easy and short.
They were relatively healthy. They probably enjoyed more leisure time than we do today.

Nor was subsistence farming a natural development. Farmers were reduced to subsistence, and were kept there for centuries, through institutionalized theft, which is to say they were reduced to subsistence through taxation. Many populations appear to have resisted sedentary grain agriculture, resisted the state that imposed it, and resisted being confined to life in or near the unhealthy and disaster-prone new sites called cities.

Objections are easy to make. It’s not hard at all to find similarities here to the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in that the French philosophe likewise believed that grain agriculture and civilization had been curses upon humanity and that the noble savage had lived much better without them.

Today we tend to think of agriculture as an unmitigated good. Look around, we might say, and imagine all this—gesturing expansively—without the grains that allow millions of people simply to eat. But our belief that agriculture in the present day is a blessing to humankind, which undoubtedly it is, does not commit us to insisting that agriculture, in all its forms, in all times and places, has always been a boon to everyone. Nor does the view that agriculture began as a curse commit us to believing that agriculture remains a curse today. Reality is allowed to be complex like that, even where a sentimental ideology like Rousseau’s cannot be.

At all stages of historical and prehistorical development, critical evaluation ought to be key. Not at all trivially, we might ask what blessings agriculture brought to the slaves of recorded history. “They get to eat” appears grossly unsatisfying given all the other ways that agriculture imposed itself on them. For free people, though, “they get to eat” isn’t so bad. With this in mind, the conflicts between ideological priors and archaeological discoveries may just be mitigated. This new story of the past in no way precludes libertarianism.

It bears noting that Scott is a writer of extraordinary talent. His prose is gorgeous, and annoyances are few. One of them, though, is as follows: he constantly peppers his work with anachronistic terms—“capitalism,” “proletariat,” “gulag,” even “human resources.” At times these anachronisms both entertain and instruct: war captives in Mesopotamia clearly fit Marx’s characterization of the proletariat rather well, even if they did not toil at sophisticated machines owned
by others. They were alienated from their labor rather more directly because they were enslaved.

Those early slaves may be much more of a proletariat than the industrial workers of the 19th century ever were. Industrial workers’ living conditions have steadily improved, and the lines between them and the other social classes have blurred rather than sharpened. War captives in early civilizations faced a different fate, and it is both just and ironic that Scott deploys the word “gulag” to name the detention camps in which they were placed.

At other times, though, the effort to connect the ancient world to the modern seems contrived, as when slavery is characterized as a “human resources” strategy. Perhaps in your human resources department, I am tempted to answer. The functionalist observation that both are about the supply of labor seems insufficient to save the analogy. Readers would do well to interrogate these terms as much for what they fail to say as for what they succeed at saying. In both cases they are instructive, and the constant interplay between the present and the distant past is one of the most appealing aspects of this book. To what extent are we still the kept creatures of the state and of the agriculture that the state imposed on us? Must that system, or any part of it, always be a curse? It will always be profitable to reflect on questions like those.

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