

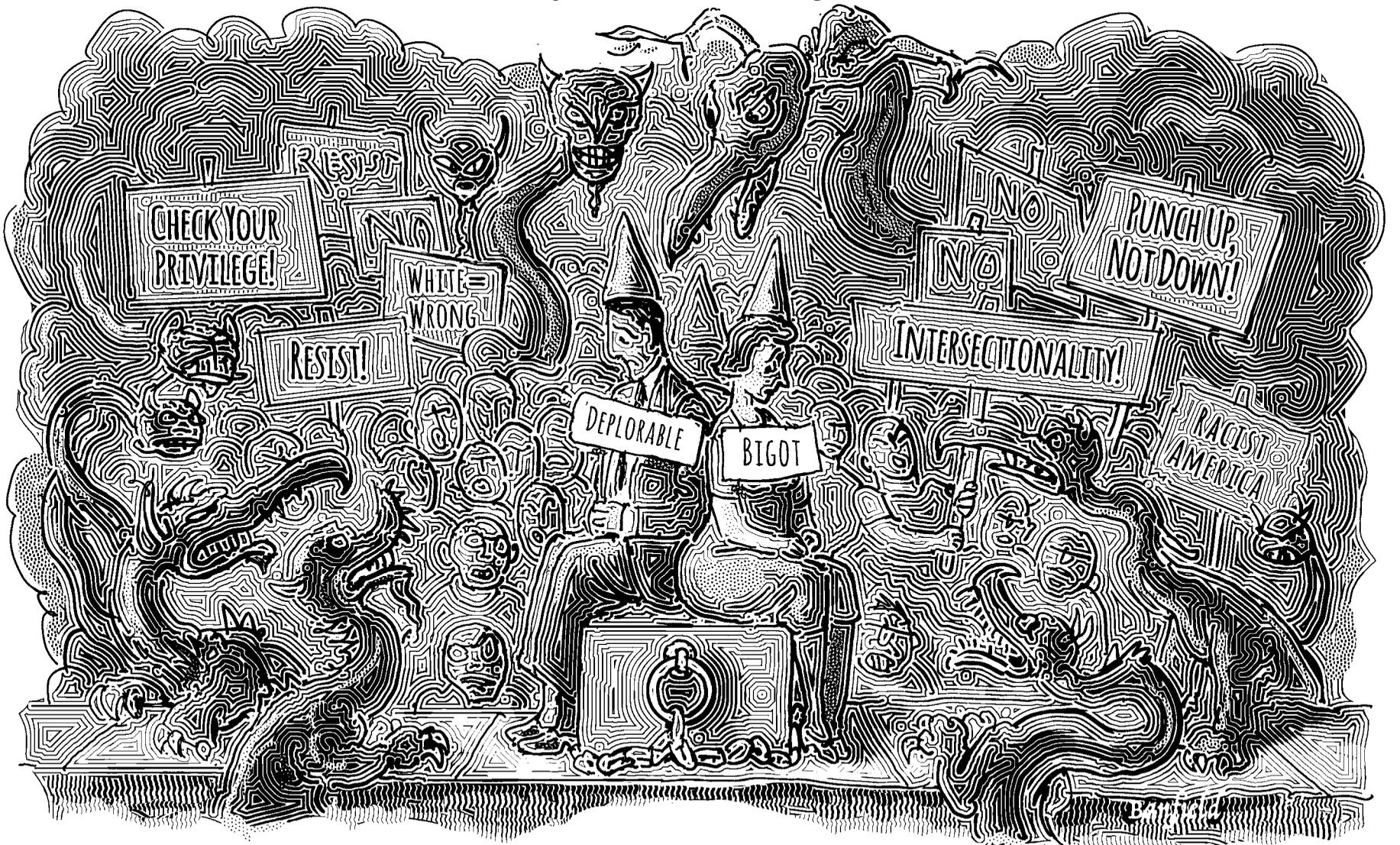
VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2018

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

The Way We Hate Now by William Voegeli



Andrew C. McCarthy:
Impeachment

James W. Ceaser:
Jonah Goldberg

Joseph Epstein:
**The American
Language**

Michael Anton:
**Trump &
the Philosophers**

John M. Ellis:
The Diversity Delusion

Amy L. Wax:
Gender Police

Christopher Caldwell:
What is Populism?

David P. Goldman:
Woodrow Wilson

Allen C. Guelzo
Charles R. Kesler:
Harry V. Jaffa at 100



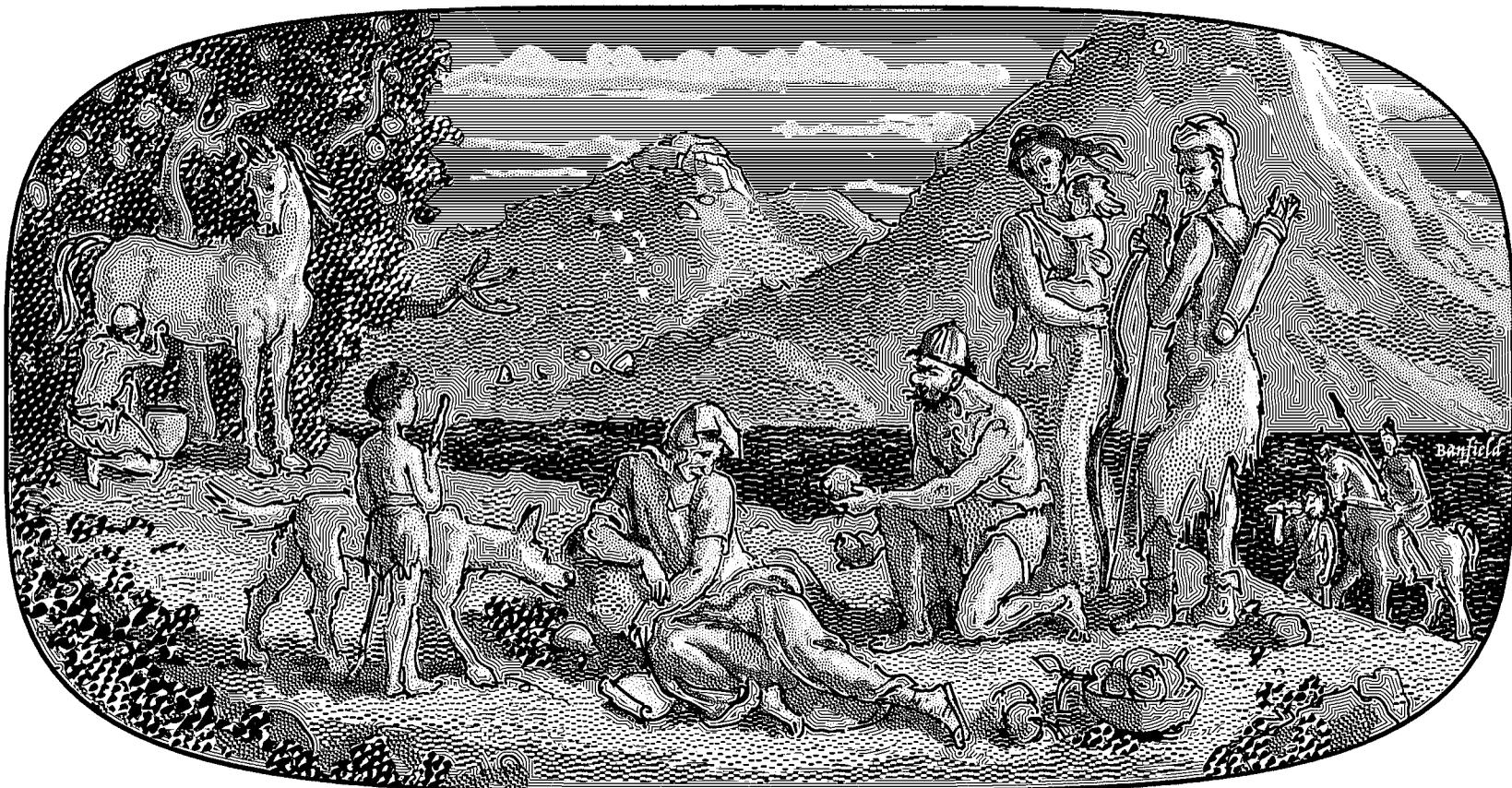
A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95
IN CANADA: \$8.95

Book Review by Paul A. Cantor

THE CASE FOR BARBARISM

Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States, by James C. Scott.
Yale University Press, 336 pages, \$26



Ovid in Exile among the Scythians (based on painting by Eugène Delacroix)

I CONFESS TO BEING A SUCKER FOR HISTORY Channel or Nat-Geo TV shows on archaeology. Evidently like many fans I especially love the “mystery” episodes that focus on the sudden disappearance of ancient civilizations. These episodes typically take this as their theme: “The people of X constructed massive monuments [pyramids, temples, palaces, fortresses, cliff dwellings], and then—as if overnight—they disappeared, abandoning their centers of power. What in the world happened to them?” The answers usually range from climate change to self-induced ecological catastrophes to conquest by warring neighbors to internal revolt by an oppressed population. On a bad day, even ancient aliens get into the act. In any case, these shows take it for granted that the norm in human history is stable civilization in the form of enduring states, and any interruptions in this pattern need to be explained.

James C. Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University, has a different take on this issue. For him, the mystery is not

why some civilizations suddenly disappeared, but how they ever managed to last as long as they did, especially when they were demanding that their people do something as laborious and useless as building pyramids. In Scott’s view of human history, up until a few centuries ago, the norm around the world was nomadic communities of varying size, and the great, fixed imperial centers of civilization were the exception—and a fragile one at that. According to Scott, large-scale political units, like the kingdoms of ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, claimed to offer their populations safety and abundant food (based on large-scale agricultural operations). But as the elites of these early civilizations pursued their own imperial agendas, including their self-aggrandizing construction projects, they made ever more unreasonable demands on their people in terms of taxes, coerced labor, and other forms of exploitation. Eventually a tipping point was reached, and the people, reconsidering the bargain they had made, decided that it was no longer worth it.

Accordingly, they escaped their oppressors by pulling up stakes and heading for the hills (or the desert or jungle or swamp, depending on the local geography).

THIS IS ESSENTIALLY THE STORY SCOTT tells in his latest book, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. It builds upon a number of brilliant volumes he has written, especially *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). His critics accuse him of being a latter-day Jean-Jacques Rousseau, rejecting civilization and romanticizing the life of the noble savage. Although there is an element of this in Scott’s view of human history, Rousseau was no fool, and we can learn a lot from his critique of civilization. Like Rousseau, Scott reminds us that civilization comes at a price, and sometimes that price can get too high. More specifically, he argues that the state—understood as a large-scale political organization—is not the all-purpose solution to human evils it purports to be; in fact the state brings many



evils of its own, including high taxes, slave labor, and epidemic diseases. Scott is not posing an apocalyptic all-or-nothing decision, as if human beings were forced to choose between civilization and barbarism. What he is offering is a different view of human history than we find in many textbooks. Based on serious historical evidence, much of it from recent archaeological research, Scott asserts that for much of history, human beings have alternated between periods of settled and nomadic existence. To use the terms of political theory, he claims that—up until the emergence of the modern nation-state (with its permanent means of bureaucratic surveillance and control)—the social contract was continually renegotiable and not a once-and-for-all, irreversible decision.

THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE SCOTT DISPUTES is familiar—it is in fact the standard history of civilization. Civilization is said to begin when large-scale agriculture is organized, supposedly by some form of centralized state that can plan and execute the complex irrigation projects that make cultivating rice or grain in great quantities possible. The vast increase in food production allows for rapid growth in population, which in turn permits a division of labor to develop. Once an agricultural surplus is secured and people are reliably living above the subsistence level, some of them no longer have to devote their entire days just to securing enough food to stay alive. For the first time in history, political and cultural elites emerge. The political elites direct the construction of the architectural monuments that we think of as the great achievements of ancient civilizations—the pyramids of Egypt or the temples of Southeast Asia. The cultural elites use their newfound leisure to create art, which supposedly is first made possible by large-scale political organization. For example, according to the archaeological record, writing was initially developed as the administrative tool of the new large political units of the ancient world, used at first mainly for recording tax rolls, royal decrees, legal judgments, and the like. In this view, literature is a by-product of the administrative state. Only once people have gotten their tax records straight can they begin to write down their myths and legends.

In this type of narrative, the civilization of the settled agriculturalists is contrasted with the barbarism of the nomadic hunters and gatherers who preceded them. Smaller in numbers and perpetually on the move—in search of the proverbial greener pastures—the nomads had no time to build monuments and no leisure to create art. They were always in search of their next meal. We would have no record of their transient existence if they were not chron-

icled in the writings of the civilized settlers. Here we get a glimpse of something circular in this kind of historical reasoning. If civilization is defined in terms of monumental architecture, urban centers, and written records, it is no great surprise that the settled agriculturalists come out looking superior to the nomadic pastoralists. When history is written by the settlers, no wonder the nomads are presented as barbarians (think, for example, of the way Indians were represented in cowboy histories of the American West).

Scott does a good job of exposing the biases that affect archaeologists' view of history. They are always in search of monumental architecture and written records of the past—that is how they make names for themselves. They are inevitably less impressed by people who leave behind no pyramids or hieroglyphics for scholars to study. And yet when we occasionally get glimpses of the cultural level of so-called barbarians, they may no longer seem so uncivilized. The ancient Scythians are virtually synonymous with barbarians (even King Lear speaks of the “barbarous Scythian”), but the jewelry and other objects they crafted out of gold (on display at, for example, the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg or the Odessa Archaeological Museum) are as beautiful as almost anything that has survived from antiquity.

Scott also questions the widespread conviction that the so-called collapse of one of these ancient monumental civilizations was an unmitigated disaster for all concerned. Take the case of the late Bronze Age civilization known as the Mycenaean. Based in the Peloponnese peninsula of what is now Greece, this civilization built monumental palaces at sites such as Mycenae and Tiryns, and its tombs were found to be filled with glorious golden treasures (now mostly on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens). This is evidently the civilization that went to war with Troy, and indeed the Mycenaeans seem to have achieved some form of hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean with their fleets and armies. According to the archaeological record, the Mycenaean civilization began to decline around 1250 B.C. and mysteriously collapsed and disappeared around 1190 or 1180 B.C. Its monumental sites were abandoned and its centers of population were drained. Many explanations have been offered for this collapse. Perhaps something like the Trojan War sapped the Mycenaeans' power and resources. Whatever its causes, the collapse of Mycenaean civilization was followed by a period of several centuries known as the Greek Dark Ages. We do not have written records of this period because literacy was lost—that is one reason why the

age is known as “dark.” The cause of civilization seems to have taken a major step backward with the dissolution of the Mycenaean centers of power.

But, Scott challenges us to ask, was the end of Mycenaean civilization really the end of the world for the ordinary people who had lived under the rule of Agamemnon and his ilk? They no longer had the pleasure of marveling at the latest lion-gated palace going up in their neighborhood, but, then again, they no longer had to drag the cyclopean stones to erect it. They could no longer glory in their latest victory over the Trojans, but, then again, they no longer had to watch their sons shipped off to die on the plains of Troy. Perhaps their day-to-day lives were not significantly transformed by the so-called collapse of Mycenaean civilization. Perhaps some of the changes were actually for the better. What looks like the end of the world to a ruling elite may be the dawn of a new era of freedom for their subjects. Perhaps the civilization, broadly conceived, actually survived, just without its old command center, thus allowing fresh possibilities to develop.

FOR EXAMPLE, IT WAS TOWARD THE end of the illiterate Greek Dark Ages that the Homeric poems began to take shape in oral form, which, given ancient writing technology, may have been at the time a freer and more flexible creative medium. Most today would think that writing out thousands of lines of epic verse was easier than composing them orally, but that was not the case back when writing was done laboriously on stone tablets. Many people tend to think of all Greek cultural achievements as centered in 5th-century B.C. Athens. But almost all scholars are now agreed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were originally composed somewhere in Asia Minor, probably beginning in the 8th century B.C. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not minor cultural achievements. They are among the crowning glories of the ancient Greek world. So score one (or rather two) for the barbarians of the Dark Ages. Homer is supposed to have championed the Greeks over the barbarians, but actually he presents the Greeks as “barbarians,” at least as Scott uses the term. The *Iliad* glorifies the victory of mobile sea raiders over the fixed citadel of Troy, and Odysseus, for all his longing to return home, has become the archetype of the perpetual wanderer. The Homeric poems celebrate heroes in a pre-political condition, free to war and plunder, before they are herded into civil communities and have their wanderlust knocked out of them.

Thus Scott posits, not a simple choice between civilization and barbarism, but a complex tradeoff between two different ways of life:



It is not uncommon for the subjects of early states to leave both agriculture and urban centers to evade taxes, conscription, epidemics, and oppression. From one perspective they may be seen to have regressed to more rudimentary forms of subsistence, such as foraging or pastoralism. But from another, and I believe broader, perspective, they may well have avoided labor and grain taxes, escaped an epidemic, traded an oppressive serfdom for greater freedom and physical mobility, and perhaps avoided death in combat. The abandonment of the state may, in such cases, be experienced as an emancipation. This is emphatically not to deny that life outside the state may often be characterized by predation and violence of other kinds, but rather to assert that we have no warrant for assuming that the abandonment of an urban center is, ipso facto, a descent into brutality and violence.

This passage is a good example of Scott's balanced analysis. Despite the charges of his detractors, he is not some dogmatic primitivist. And if he sometimes overstates his case, it is only to shake us out of our entrenched habits of thinking.

I AM NOT A PROFESSIONAL ARCHAEOLOGIST, and I am not qualified to evaluate all the evidence Scott assembles in *Against the Grain*. What I can offer as an outsider to the field, however, is a fresh perspective on these debates by proposing a modern parallel. When arguing about the issues Scott raises, I have found that people have a hard time thinking outside the box of the modern nation-state. Today's world is officially divided into nation-states, and the rule is that political units are firmly settled, with fixed boundaries and continuity over time. Any departure from this norm puzzles us. The great value of Scott's works is that they reveal how this kind of political stability is the exception, rather than the rule, in the grand sweep of history. In fact, flipping through any historical atlas will remind us how unstable political borders have been even in the era of the modern nation-state. But many Americans, used to political units like the United States, with its massive federal bureaucracy securely in place, have a hard time imagining a large-scale political community simply collapsing overnight.

Yet this kind of collapse did happen in our lifetime, namely the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in the late 1980s and early '90s. There are certainly many problems in comparing the Soviet Union to the kingdoms

and the empires of the ancient world. Modern political units are characterized by what is now frequently referred to as the "deep state," whereas communities like Ancient Egypt or Mycenae were "shallow states" (if they could be properly categorized as "states" at all). In the ancient world, if you overthrew a king or a pharaoh or an emperor, you were in a position to remake the entire community. By contrast, the modern nation-state possesses a well-organized, institutionally embedded bureaucracy that is able to survive regime changes and thus provide continuity in government (particularly in terms of tax collection). Looking at the past century and a half, sometimes it seems as if the bureaucracy the Czars created in the 19th century to rule Russia from Moscow was simply recreated by Lenin and Stalin, and then somehow managed to cling to power in the regimes that followed the fall of Communism. That is why the USSR's collapse did not mean that Moscow was abandoned, with Stalin's colossal Seven Sisters skyscrapers left to decay into ruin.

STILL, THE PARALLELS BETWEEN THE collapse of the Soviet Union and the kind of events Scott discusses in the ancient world are striking—and instructive. The Soviet Union was a sprawling empire, with many satellite nations under its hegemony. Right up to the moment of its collapse, it seemed to be one of the most powerful nations on Earth—a superpower. Accordingly, no one expected it to fall, least of all its own rulers or Kremlinologists in the West. Its collapse followed the pattern Scott outlines in the ancient world, starting at the periphery of its hegemony and moving inward. The satellites in Eastern Europe were the first to go, and then the peripheral "Soviet Socialist Republics" broke off to become independent nations with surprising ease. Moreover, by historical standards the collapse happened "overnight"; the Soviet Union fell apart far more quickly than did most of the empires of the ancient world. Its enemies—and they were legion—hailed its collapse as a boon and a great victory for the West in the Cold War. But not everybody celebrated this moment. No less an authority than Vladimir Putin is reported to have said: "[T]he collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century."

I seldom if ever find myself agreeing with Vladimir Putin, but in this case, he does have a point. The Soviet Union had many achievements to its credit, especially of the monumental variety so beloved by archaeologists. It undertook many vast engineering and construction projects (admittedly often unsuccessfully), building canals, railroads, and the showcase Moscow subway system. In its achievements

in space, it rivaled the United States, putting the first satellite and the first human being into earth orbit. The Russian people justifiably took pride in what their nation achieved on the world stage; and, for that matter, at various points many in the West championed the Soviet system and confidently (if foolishly) predicted that it would overtake the United States as the world's largest economy. In cultural terms, the Soviet Union's record is mixed, but at least in the fields of ballet and classical music, state support of the arts made Soviet performers the envy of the world. To this day, well-respected Russian (and Ukrainian) musicians lament the demise of the Soviet system that did so much to encourage the development of young performers and gave the world the likes of Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels, and David Oistrakh.

"Enough already," I can hear my readers saying. "The Soviet Union was a tyranny. It was the *evil* empire. Don't you realize that its fall was a good thing, and liberated millions of oppressed people?" That is exactly why I am bringing it up. I have chosen an example where it is easier to see that the collapse of a "glorious" regime can be of benefit to the people who lived under it. It is more difficult to see collapse as something good when we look back at the distant past. Of Old Kingdom Egypt, we now see only the magnificent achievement of the pyramids. But the people who were forced in one way or another to build those monuments to their rulers' monumental egos may well have rejoiced when the age of the pyramid-builders came to an end.

IT IS SOBERING TO THINK HOW MUCH OF Ancient Egypt's resources (what we would call its GDP) was squandered on the essentially worthless task of building the pyramids, which, as the Egyptians quickly learned, did not even fulfill their primary task of protecting the pharaoh's mummy and treasure from tomb robbers. The current official Egyptian line—that the pyramids were an exercise in nation-building and the workers gladly participated in the enterprise—is obviously a myth, cobbled together to cover over the dark blot of tyranny in the ancient Egyptian past by reimagining pyramid construction as some kind of benevolent public works project. We are endlessly bombarded with touristic propaganda about their grandeur. We stare at their vast bulk and admire them as sheer feats of ancient engineering. But we cannot and will never see what ancient Egypt might have accomplished if it had devoted all those resources of labor, time, and materials to something more—pardon the pun—constructive. Who knows? Perhaps the ancient Egyptians might have built the equivalent of the Suez Canal in antiquity.



We know much more about the Soviet Union than we do about ancient Egypt, and so we can see its fundamental failure—on a massive scale, it diverted resources to its military, taking them away from its domestic economy. The Soviet military grew fat, while the people grew thin. Something similar happened in all the ancient monumental civilizations Scott discusses, and he should be praised for reminding us that history often looks different from the perspective of the ruled, rather than the rulers.

Without really meaning to, but driven by the logic of their profession, archaeologists risk ending up as apologists for some of the worst tyrants of history. To praise the Great Pyramid or the Great Wall of China seems logical for archaeologists, who want to preserve and study these monuments, and yet they are also in the habit of praising the autocratic rulers who had them built. I love the Terracotta Warriors as much as the next guy—and even dutifully journeyed to Xian to see them *in situ*—but I am sick of hearing archaeologists sing the praises of Emperor Qin Shi Huang. His tomb may be the eighth wonder of the world, but think of how many people died building it and how the project effectively bankrupted his country. As Scott points out, it is odd to celebrate the Emperor's eternal achievement when resent-

ment against his oppressive practices sparked a rebellion and brought down his dynasty within 15 years of his death (leaving his magnificent tomb burned and looted—and forgotten for over 2,000 years). In sum, if you understand why people in our day cheered the collapse of the Soviet Union, you can grasp Scott's point that people in the ancient world may well have benefitted from the downfall of oppressive dynasties, no matter how impressive their architecture may have been.

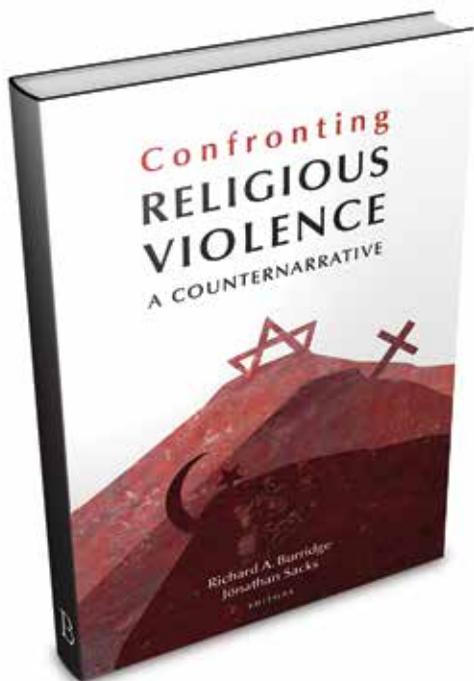
Scott's great achievement over the years in his remarkable series of books is to have demystified and demythologized the state. In the ancient world, it claimed to rule its people in the name of the gods, if not directly by the gods. The state could do no wrong, and its people were encouraged to think of themselves as utterly dependent on it. In many ancient kingdoms, the state took credit for the continued functioning of the natural order; in some cases, the king claimed to be personally responsible for the fertility of the land. In such circumstances, as Scott suggests, it was healthy for dynasties periodically to be obliterated. The emperor could die, and yet the sun would continue to rise each day without his help. Even in today's sophis-

ticated and supposedly enlightened world, we still project mythical powers onto our rulers, and turn to them as saviors. We think that a president can wave a magic wand and single-handedly revive the economy, or slow the rise of the oceans. Scott's study of ancient civilizations warns us against taking our rulers at their word and viewing them as divine.

As many have noted, Scott sometimes gets carried away in his praise of nomadic barbarians, and he may underestimate the virtues of settled civilization. Still, showing he is the genuine heir of Rousseau, Scott reminds us that the price paid for grandiose achievements like the pyramids and the Terracotta Warriors may be human freedom. He supplies an important counterweight to today's politicized archaeology. *Against the Grain* takes an honorable place in a long line of works that explore the value of nomadic, "barbarian" existence, from Tacitus' *Germania* and *Agricola* to J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). Despite the claims of the history books, statelessness may not be an entirely negative condition, and nomadic existence may have something to teach us about the nature of human freedom.

Paul A. Cantor is Clifton Waller Barrett Professor of English at the University of Virginia.

FROM RICHARD A. BURRIDGE AND JONATHAN SACKS



“A spiritually uplifting and ultimately hopeful picture of our world”

—AMBASSADOR AKBAR AHMED,
Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies,
American University, Washington, DC

Books for Good | baylorpress.com

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to
the *Claremont Review of Books*

“The Claremont Review of Books is an outstanding literary publication written by leading scholars and critics. It covers a wide range of topics in trenchant and decisive language, combining learning with wit, elegance, and judgment.”

—Paul Johnson

Subscribe to the *CRB* today and save 25% off the newsstand price. A one-year subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier conservative book review, visit www.claremont.org/crb or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS
1317 W. FOOTHILL
BLVD, SUITE 120,
UPLAND, CA
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 504
UPLAND, CA