

# The Welfare of Society is not the Welfare of the State

I've long been fascinated with the ominously named "Dark Ages". (As if Rome had electricity). I just finished reading James C. Scott's, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* and it got me thinking about this again.

From a big picture view, the Roman Empire was like the Soviet Union in many ways. Most of the people under its rule were subjected against their will. Massive forced labor initiatives for vanity projects, public works, and military conquest. Walls and fortifications, not only to keep non-subjects out but to keep subjects in. When the Soviet Union collapsed, it didn't plunge Eastern Europe and Russia into darkness. The visible from space monuments and state projects abated, and power dispersed from the center to several peripheries.

The fall of Rome was similar. Not so much a big, dramatic, single event as a gradual process of decentralization, the inevitable result of the Roman state squeezing the goose laying the golden eggs. The sheer cost of forced labor, massive slave populations, and constant efforts to prevent unhappy subjects from exit and revolt were unsustainable. The center collapsed, bleeding power back to dispersed modules.

It didn't all go dark for the former subjects; not any more than the million or so who left the City of Detroit over the past five decades. Former Detroiters aren't in a dark age because their old city is a shell of itself. They're in Chicago, Portland, Tampa, and the lovely suburbs of Oakland County. Their lives likely improved (why else would they leave?).

Society and the state do not share the same progress chart. The welfare of one doesn't positively correlate with the welfare of the other. In fact, most of the time, there is an inverse relationship.

Historians and archaeologists have a very difficult time documenting society, while state projects and written records are much easier. The latter, of course, proclaim the glories of stupid boondoggles and the honor of conquest, mass murder, subjugation, and slavery.

When a state falls (and they all do eventually; not because of the wrong leaders, but because they are states), some people suffer. Namely, state leaders and the rent-seeking monopolists in bed with them. But on the whole, the shift in power away from easily identified state centers to dispersed, shifting modules is not bad for humanity. Society tends to push in this direction for a reason. Did the New World enter a dark age with the end of the British global empire? Surely some state connected and supported actors suffered. But how many slaves and subjects improved their condition?

In a thousand years, absent all the digital data, historians and archaeologists might

discover grand statues and massive works of military and monumental prowess in the former Soviet Union. They might realize these great works came to a halt, along with unified written narratives of the great leaders who pushed them. They might conclude that the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the final straw for this great empire and that a dark age descended upon eastern Europe and Russia.

Logically and historically, society precedes the state. In fact, Scott's work reveals that states are quite an anomaly, their fragile existence a factor in the minority of societies for short periods of time. They are a parasitic pattern that pops up from time to time where conditions are right, then dies under their own incentive structure after a few decades or centuries.

We'd be wise to not conflate the welfare of societies with the welfare of the states that sometimes feed off them.