



Nomad-State Relationships in International Relations Before and After Borders

Edited by
Jamie Levin

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CHAPTER 3

The Anti-Nomadic Bias of Political Theory

Erik Ringmar

Over the last couple of decades, the conditions of life for nomadic peoples have been radically rethought (Devore & Lee, 1999). Contrary to what we once were told, the lives of hunters, gatherers and pastoralists are generally not “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 1651, i:13, p. 84). Rather, barring environmental calamities, their lives are sociable, rich, pleasant, sophisticated and long. Gatherers are not desperately digging for roots and hunters are not chasing wild geese. Instead hunters and gatherers have traditionally lived in abundant environments where looking for food is similar to looking for something to eat in a refrigerator (Turnbull, 1984, pp. 96–108). Their days can be spent on leisurely activities, and when food is required, they simply go and get it. Hunters and gatherers eat better than farmers since their diet is more varied; they live longer too since they are not forced to live in confined areas where diseases

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spread (Scott, 2017, pp. 96–113). Likewise, although pastoralists occasionally need to move their herds to new pastures, their workday is nowhere near as long or intense as that of farmers. In addition, since the kinds of resources that prop up sharp inequalities are difficult to move, nomadic societies are more egalitarian than sedentary societies. Decision-making is consensual; it involves everyone, although the older and presumably wiser members of the community typically have a larger say.

This revisionist account is not uncontested to be sure, and all groups of foragers and pastoralists are not the same (Hurtado & Hill, 1995; Widerquist & McCall, 2017, pp. 176–218). Although their mobile condition imposes a certain logic on all of them, each group is subject to unique conditions. And yet, the very possibility that something like the revisionist account might be correct forces us to read the European canon of political theory in a new light (Barnard, 1999, pp. 375–383; Widerquist & McCall, 2017). Political theorists have always regarded the lives of nomadic peoples as an abomination and as the condition from which they had to be rescued by the establishment of the state. Although anthropologists may be overly enthusiastic and perhaps politically motivated—there is an “anarcho-primitivist” manifesto lurking just under the surface of their texts—the biases of that profession are surely nothing compared to the biases of the political theorists themselves. If the lives of nomadic peoples are even half as attractive as some anthropologists claim, political theory as we know it has to be radically rethought. If there is a nomadic alternative to the modern state, who in their right mind would prefer a sedentary life of incessant toil, political repression and inherited injustices? Why pay taxes and die in the state’s wars?¹

Put differently, a consideration of the lives of nomadic peoples allows us to expose the rhetorical strategies on which political theory relies. It is mainly by means of rhetoric, after all, not physical coercion, that the state achieves consent. Coercion is expensive and difficult to carry out, it is far better if people can be convinced to freely subjugate themselves to the authorities. In order to achieve this end, states rely on what the ancient Greeks referred to as *theorein*, a verb meaning “to consider,” “speculate,” “look at,” with contemporary English-language derivatives such as “theater” and “theory” (Puchner, 2010, pp. 6–7). Theater and theory are

¹ “[T]he average person,” Widerquist and McCall (2017) conclude, “is better off in most contemporary state societies,” but “significant numbers of people are worse off in capitalist state societies than they would be even in a small-scale stateless society” (p. 177).

both ways of showing something to be the case. While watching a theatrical performance we suspend disbelief; the performance makes a reality out of the world with which we are presented. Theory, likewise, is a sort of mental seeing; it is a way of identifying the categories, variables, relationships and causes which together make up a certain world. Just like the theater, theory explains and thereby justifies and legitimizes what is being shown.

The state has relied both on political theater and on political theory in order to enforce loyalty and obedience from the people subject to it. There are three junctures in human history, in particular, when this combination of the theatrical and the theoretical has been called for. And, at each juncture, the state invoked the supreme authority of various capitalized entities in order to support its claims. When city-states were first established in ancient Greece, a nomadic life was rejected by references to Nature; when sovereign states emerged in Europe in the late Renaissance, a nomadic life was rejected by means of references to God; and when finally European states in the nineteenth-century came to colonize much of the rest of the world, a nomadic life was rejected by means of references to History. The state is thrice born, thrice necessary. The state is legitimate since it is required by Nature, by God and by History.

NATURE: POLITICAL ANIMALS

The first empires in the eastern Mediterranean—the Minoan and the Phoenician—were thalassocracies, empires not of the land but of the ocean. It was the sea that provided people with a living from fishing and trade. Thalassocracies have little territorial extension but great geographical scope. Even if the islands in the enormous Greek archipelago were barren and poor, they survived thanks to the links they established between each other (Horden & Purcell, 2000, pp. 342–400; Taylor & Vlassopoulos, 2015). The people of the sea were nomads, we might say; they belonged less to a particular place than to the network of places which their trading links created. This is how Greek settlements fanned out across the archipelago, establishing colonies as far away as in southern France. Odysseus and Herodotus may have been unusually prolific travelers, but other Greeks traveled widely too (Hartog, 2001, pp. 47–63). At the same time, and through the same networks, foreign, eastern, influences were brought into the Greek world—Egyptian wisdom, religious cults, architectural forms, assorted tools and techniques (Vlassopoulos, 2007, pp. 91–111).

That which we call “Greece” were nodes in a network in the eastern Mediterranean through which goods, people and ideas were widely disseminated.

Late in the sixth century BCE this world was dramatically transformed (Euben, 1986). This was when the *polis*, the city-state, established itself as the pre-eminent political unit. The world of city-states is the classical Greek world; the Greece we know from history books. The predominant literary form here were tragedies. Staged in amphitheaters, the tragedies were performances which all citizens of the *polis* were required to attend (Goldhill, 1997; Mendelsohn, 2016). The playwrights competed with each other in describing to the audience what the *polis* was like and who they themselves were. This is how the *polis* became an object of public reflection. A play such as Sophocles’s *Antigone* dramatizes the conflict between the moral code of the Homeric society which now was vanishing and the laws laid down by the new city-state (Steiner, 1996, pp. 19–42). As Antigone found out when she tried to bury her dead brother according to the traditional rites, the laws of the city trumped the obligations of family ties.

If the theater was intended for people at large, political theory was intended for a small elite. Political theory too was a way of reflecting on the nature of the *polis*. In *The Laws*, Plato told the story of the development of political institutions, from an initial condition in which “there were a few herds of cattle, and perhaps a surviving stock of goats,” to a time in which there was “a city, a constitution, a legislation” (Plato, 1934, p. 57). The ideal state, Plato explained, should be located at least 80 *stadia*, some 15 kilometers, away from the sea lest the citizens be seduced by its temptations—to travel, to enrich themselves, and to build empires. The proximity of the sea “fills a city with wholesale traffic and retail huckstering, breeds shifty and distrustful habits of the soul, and thus makes a society distrustful and unfriendly both of itself as well as towards mankind at large” (Plato, 1934, p. 57). To limit the impact of foreign ideas, travel should be restricted by the authorities and no person under the age of forty should be allowed to go abroad (Plato, 1934, pp. 344, 346). The blueprint for the ideal city-state which Plato presented in *The Republic* is the very opposite of the thalassocracies of the past. It is sedentary, walled-in, inegalitarian and repressive, with citizenship replacing commercial commitments and laws replacing time-honored customs (Diamond, 1974, pp. 176–202).

Aristotle was no less insistent than Plato in his defense of the city. Human beings, he explained, are by nature *zoon politikon*, “political animals” (Aristotle, 1893, p. 1253a2). Yet, nature, in Aristotle’s account, did not refer to the wilderness which existed outside the city walls, but instead to the internal process of change, *phusis*, integral to the development of all beings. It is in the nature of something to reach its *telos*, and thereby eventually to fully become what its nature intends it to be. The classical example is the acorn destined by nature to become an oak tree. A *zoon politikon* is consequently a being who only can realize its *telos* under the political arrangements that exist in a *polis*. There are several ways in which this end can be achieved. In the city we interact with other human beings and thereby educate and develop ourselves, but politics also allows us to rule over others and others to rule over us; in the city we learn to make laws, but also how to follow them. In much the same way, Aristotle explained, it is in the nature of certain humans to be slaves and of women to be confined to the home. It is the *polis* which allows them too to realize their not-fully-human nature.

The implications for nomadic peoples are obvious enough. A peripatetic life lived outside of the city walls cannot be a human life properly speaking. In order to survive in the wilderness, you must either be a god or a beast (Aristotle, 1893, p. 1253a27). Gods and beasts do not need the city, but human beings do. Banishment was consequently the worst form of punishment. To be banished was not only to be alienated from the city but from one’s nature; it was to be alive but no longer as a human being. The Greeks feared this state as a question of “panic,” the sensation which suddenly overcomes you when you have followed the flute-playing god Pan into the wilderness, when he suddenly vanishes, and you realize that you are lost and alone.

While the life of pastoralists was rejected, it had already in classical times become an object of elaborate *rêveries*. The daydreams focused on Arcadia, a region in the interior of the Peloponnese peninsula, where shepherds tended their flocks and lived beyond the reach of the state (Hartog, 2001, pp. 133–150). To the Greeks, Arcadia was a rebarbative place, best avoided, which contained peoples so primitive that they engaged in human sacrifices and so ignorant of agricultural practices that they ate acorns with their mutton (Wills, 1998, pp. 16, 18). The Romans, however, read Virgil, who in his *Eclogues* idealized the virtues of pastoral life (Virgil, 1847). Yet, these accounts of a life lived beyond the reach of the state were vicarious dreams, not advocacies for a nomadic lifestyle. No one actually wanted to

go to Arcadia nor live the lives of its inhabitants. And yet, the suggestion that a place like this existed, helped to make life subject to the state half-way bearable.

GOD: THE GREAT LEVIATHAN

The states which were established in Europe in the course of the Renaissance made a series of rather extraordinary claims. Calling themselves “sovereign,” they insisted that they were self-governing and independent of all other authorities, and that they had the right to collect taxes and war contributions from the people subject to them. These sacrifices, moreover, were to be made obediently, in an orderly fashion, and out of a sense of loyalty and even love. To make these demands seem legitimate, the early modern European states too relied on a combination of political theater and political theory. Coronations, progressions, funerals and royal occasions of all kinds were turned into spectacles of pomp and circumstance through which the presumptive subjects were bedazzled and overawed. Kings have magical powers, the subjects were told; they can heal the sick through a mere touch of their hands and kill and confound their enemies through the power of their oratory (Bloch, 1990, pp. 177–213). The king was anointed by God, ruling in God’s name, and it was consequently with God himself that critics of the king had to tussle.

When it came to convincing the intellectual elite, the state relied mainly, much as in Greece, on political theory. A new generation of political theorists emerged, ready and willing to provide the sovereign rulers with the arguments they needed. The political theorists made themselves a God of their own. Thomas Hobbes called him “that great Leviathan”—“that Mortall God, to which wee owe under the Immortall God, our peace and defence” (Hobbes, 1651, ii:17, p. 119). But just as the God of the theatrical displays, this man-made God too was vehemently anti-nomadic. The argument proceeded by radically redefining the Greek understanding of nature. Nature, political theorists now explained, was the original, nomadic condition in which human beings had lived before the establishment of the state. This condition was envisioned as a large forest or a vast plain in which individuals and small groups of families roamed around with no fixed abode. Here man was

a naked Creature no better than dumb, wanting all Things, satisfying his Hunger with Roots and Herbs, slaking his Thirst with any Water he can

find, avoiding the Extremities of the Weather, by creeping into Caves, or the like, exposed an easy Prey to the ravenous Beasts, and trembling at the Sight of any of them. (Pufendorf, 1735, bk. ii:1, p. 8)

It was not of course that people in the Middle Ages generally had lived the lives of nomads, and it was not that the sovereign state had emerged from this state. Rather, the state of nature was a potential condition to which mankind could revert in case the power of the state was undermined. This made rebellion a crime not only against a ruler but against oneself and one's society. The harsher and more unacceptable the terms in which the state of nature was described, the more necessary the state could be presented as being—and the more justified its repressive measures.

Thomas Hobbes' (1651) description of the state of nature was very harsh indeed. In the state of nature, he explained, man was "a wolf to other men," ruthless and entirely ruled by selfish appetites. As a result, in the state of nature

there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death. (i:13, p. 84)

It was in order to escape this condition that foragers and pastoralists had renounced their right to self-protection and signed a contract which created a common authority powerful enough to repress them and "keep them all in awe" (Hobbes, 1651, ii:17, p. 116). "For by this Authoritie, given him by every particular man in the Common-Wealth, he hath the use of so much Power and Strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is inabled to forme the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad" (Hobbes, 1651, ii:17:119).

Nature, Aristotle had argued, could be discovered within each person, but according to the political theorists of the early modern era, it was instead the person who could be discovered in nature. Finding man in nature, in the wilderness, we find him as he really is. Indeed, he is too human—too selfish, too aggressive. Therefore, while the Greeks needed

politics in order to realize their nature and thereby their highest ideals, man now needed politics in order to escape their natures and their basic instincts. A political animal, according to the political theorists, is a wild animal domesticated; a wolf defanged. As Pufendorf (1735) explained, “[w]e call a man a truly political animal,” who is “a good citizen,” and he is a good citizen:

if he promptly obeys the commands of the rulers, if he strives with all his might for the public good, and willingly subordinates thereto his private good, or rather if he thinks nothing good for himself, unless it is likewise good for the state too; and finally if he shows himself accommodating to the other citizens. (bk. ii:5, p. 5)

The state of nature was not only a thought experiment, it had real-world counterparts. This, at least, is what early modern Europeans concluded as a result of their far-flung explorations. If we think the state of nature implausible, Hobbes noted, we have only to consider the lives led by “the savage people in many places of America” (Hobbes, 1651, part i:13, p. 85). Savages, just as the imaginary inhabitants of the state of nature, are people who move around from place to place. They too lack a government and are miserable and poor. These facts provided Europeans with the rationale they needed for colonization (Fitzmaurice, 2007). The land on which the nomads roamed was not fenced in, they pointed out, and it consequently had no owner. One result of this lack of ownership was that the land was far less productive than it could be. Francisco de Vitoria, a theologian and jurist in Salamanca, quoted the Bible to the effect that God has given human beings the world in common, but that we all have an obligation to take care of it to the best of our abilities (Scott, 1934; Vitoria, 1964). It was this obligation which the peoples of the Americas had failed to fulfill. “[T]he whole earth is the Lord’s garden,” as John Winthrop (1629/1846; Harriot, 1903), a Puritan lawyer and one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, explained

and he hath give it to the sons of Adam to be tilled and improved by them. Why then should we stand starving here for places of habitation ... and in the mean time suffer whole countries, as profitable for the use of man, to lie waste without any improvement? (p. 272)

The problem with the state of nature, John Locke (1689/1821) explained in the second of the *Two Treatises on Government*, is that our property rights are insecure (bk. v, pp. 208–230). Thus, even if we put up a fence around our land, there is no reason why others should respect it. Since this makes it impossible to make a living from agriculture, we too are forced to forage for food. In this we are no better off than the “wild Indian” who is both peripatetic and property-less, and infinitely poorer than even the poorest man in England. Locke (1689/1821) concluded that “in the beginning all the world was America” (bk. v, pp. 228–229). Only if property rights are made secure, will economic development be possible. Indeed, “government has no other end but the preservation of property” (bk. vii, p. 279). Government, that is, is required to rescue us all from a nomadic way of life.

HISTORY: THE RUDE BECOMING POLISHED

The demands made on behalf of European states in the nineteenth century were, if anything, even more extravagant. At the height of the colonial era, they demanded the right not only to rule themselves and their subjects, but to rule the whole world. No one anywhere was going to escape their reach. In order to put persuasive force behind this project, the Europeans relied on the same time-honored combination of stagecraft and political theory as at previous junctures in history. To make them realize that all resistance was futile, the non-European natives were shown convincing evidence of the Europeans’ might (Ringmar, 2013a, pp. 271–272). This included examples of their science, technology and medical advances, but the most convincing demonstrations were carried out in the theaters of war. Since most colonies were too large and too far away to be dominated by military means, the use of force was turned into a terrifying display. This is why the French in Algeria in the 1840s not only killed the native males who rebelled against them, but also their wives and children; and why the British, after the uprising in India in 1857, not only executed the insurgents, but shot them out of the mouths of cannons. Lessons were to be taught *pour décourager les autres* (Ringmar, 2013b).

However, political theory was needed as well. The natives had to be told why they were colonized, and a rationale had to be given to critics back home in Europe. As always, political theorists rose to the task. That nomadic peoples are savages—from *salvaticus*, “of the woods”—had long been established, but it was only in the course of the eighteenth-century

that “civilization” came to be identified as the standard by which their lives were to be measured (Gong, 1984). The term civilization was admittedly rather difficult to define, but typically it meant the opposite of everything nomadic. Derived from *civis*—the “citizen” of a city-state—civilization was more than anything a feature of the lives of city-dwellers. While “a savage tribe consists of a handful of individuals wandering or thinly scattered over a vast tract of country,” as John Stuart Mill explained, civilization is a matter of “a dense population ... dwelling in fixed habitations, and largely collected together in towns and villages” (Mill, 1836/1859, p. 161). What the savages lacked more than anything was refinement and sophistication. City people have time for leisure, conversations and reflection; they have good manners, soft hands and clean clothes; they keep up with developments elsewhere, know the latest news and fashions. They are, in the eighteenth-century parlance, “polished,” whereas savages are “rude.” Civilization is the process whereby the rude gradually comes to be polished.

As the political theorists of the eighteenth century went on to explain, life in a polished and in a rude society have next to nothing in common. The best explanation for these differences, Adam Ferguson (1773) pointed out in his *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, is to be found in the principles by which societies are organized (pp. 301–314). Consider the division of labor. In a society with little division of labor—where few people specialize on particular tasks—everyone will be more or less alike, and so will their lives. There is consequently little reason for them to exchange goods and services with each other. As a result, there will also be little by means of economic development. It is only through specialization, as Adam Smith (1776) explained in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, that the full economic potential of society is unleashed (vol. 2, pp. 5–26). It is “the prospect of being able to exchange one commodity for another,” as Ferguson (1773) put it, which “turns, by degrees, the hunter and the warrior into a tradesman and a merchant” (pp. 301–302). It is this transformation which eventually makes nomads into city-dwellers and thereby members of civil—civilized and civilizing—society.

It is difficult not to see this transformation as a matter of progress. The polished was not only different from the rude, but an improvement on it. Economic development takes us from a condition that is worse to one that is better. History, as Smith, Ferguson and their fellow Scottish philosophers explained, moves through stages, and each stage is more civilized

than the one that went before it (Smith, 1773/1978; 1776, vol. 1, pp. 122–147). Hunters and gatherers were at the lowest stage of human development since they had next to no division of labor, above them were pastoralists who had some, and then came farmers. However, it was only in commercial society, with its reliance on economic markets, that the division of labor was fully developed. It was only in commercial society that people were properly civilized. Incidentally, this was also the kind of society in which the Scottish philosophers themselves lived.

This series of stages, each one replacing the last, is what the philosophers of the Enlightenment came to call a “universal history.” Universal histories had been written before, but they had been great encyclopedias of assorted facts concerning everything that possibly could be said about strange people in far-away places (Bossuet, 1771). In the Enlightenment, by contrast, universal history became “Universal History,” a philosophical idea and a capitalized abstraction, which organized all the disparate facts of the past according to a definite scheme. Social life was not random, it turned out; it had a pattern and a direction which could be discovered by those who studied it. Documenting this philosophical history was the monumental task undertaken by several authors. In addition to the works by Ferguson and Smith, universal histories were written by John Millar, William Robertson, Henry Home Kames, Abbé Raynal, Johann Gottfried Herder and Immanuel Kant, among others (Bury, 1920, pp. 168–169; Raynal, 1777). Yet, the apotheosis of the genre was reached with G.W.F. Hegel. In his version, Universal History was a matter of the way the dialectical potential of the *Weltgeist* unfolded itself in time. And as he concluded, world history was all leading up to the establishment of the state. The state is inevitable, it must happen; *der Gang Gottes in der Welt daß der Staat ist* (Hegel, 1820/1991, para. 258).

It was this Universal History which at the end of the nineteenth century gave the European colonizers such self-confidence and provided an intellectual rationale for their take-over of the world (Gong, 1984; Meek, 2011; Ringmar, 2014). If there really was a pattern to world history, and if everyone had to move in the direction in which Europe already had moved, then resistance was futile. What History willed, History required. The sooner the native peoples gave in to the Europeans, the quicker and more painless the process of transformation would be. The only remaining question was whether it was within the powers of the most savage of nomads to make the transition. The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment had been quite optimistic in this regard and many nineteenth-century liberals

agreed. Differences between societies were accordingly only temporary aberrations which, given sufficient education and patience, eventually could be overcome (Raynal, 1777, vol. 2, p. 350). Colonialism, from this perspective, was a form of tutelage. Yet, many Europeans were far less optimistic. Reading Herbert Spencer and misreading Charles Darwin, they concluded that hunters and gatherers, such as those encountered in Tasmania, Southwestern Africa and Tierra del Fuego, were congenitally inferior to the Europeans and thereby unable to improve. As such they would sooner or later be annihilated by History, as helped along by the Europeans themselves.

But there were also dissenters. Or rather, even though few Europeans would have preferred a rude life to a polished one, they still liked to contemplate the possibility of such a life. This was, as we saw, the role of the dreams dreamed of Arcadia, but in the eighteenth century it was also a device employed to criticize the pretensions, foibles and injustices of civilized society. There was an entire literary genre—of which Montesquieu’s (1721, 1913) *Lettres Persanes* was the first—in which people from ostensibly savage places were made to speak much-needed truths. Voltaire contributed to the genre, and so did Denis Diderot (1796) in *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, a series of conversations between European explorers and Tahitian villagers. And just as the Romans, civilized Europeans liked to imitate the rustic pleasures of nomadic life.² Hunting and fishing, Adam Smith (1776) pointed out, are “the most important employments of mankind in the rude state of society,” yet in civilized society the same activities become our “most agreeable amusements,” and we “pursue for pleasure what they once followed from necessity” (vol. 1, p. 123). It was by imagining themselves in nomadic places, and by mimicking nomadic lives, that the Europeans mustered the will to carry the yoke of their civilization.

NATURE, GOD AND HISTORY

The examples provided by the lives of nomads is a constant threat to the legitimacy of the state. If anthropologists are even half correct, the nomadic lifestyle is highly attractive. Hunters, gatherers and pastoralists

²As Arthur Lovejoy points out, this genre does *not* include Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755), *Discours sur l’origine et les fondemens de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, Lovejoy (1923) “The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau’s ‘Discourse on Inequality’,” 165–186.

live freer lives, in more egalitarian societies, they work less, eat better and are not as exposed to diseases. In order to convince people to give up this lifestyle and subject themselves to the power of the state, some very powerful rhetoric is required. This was supplied by what the ancient Greeks referred to as *theorein*—by theater and by theory. The theater was the most effective way to convince ordinary people. In public performances they were shown what would happen if they failed to submit to the power of the state. The Greeks performed these plays in amphitheaters; the kings of early modern Europe arranged processions and ostentatious displays; the colonial masters of the nineteenth century staged spectacular acts of cruelty designed to crush all resistance.

For educated people, *theorein* took instead the form of political theory. Theory too is a form of showing, of making evident, and what was shown and made evident was what would happen if the state failed to prevail. By going against the state, we go against Nature, said the ancient Greeks; we go against God, said the theorists of sovereignty in early modern Europe; we go against History, said the eighteenth-century philosophers of civilization. The state is legitimate since it is required by Nature, by God and by History. The state is thrice born, thrice necessary. The Nature which we find inside us demands it, but so does the Nature in which we find ourselves. God gives blessings to the king from high and punishes those who fail to pay their taxes. But the state is required by History too. What History requires must sooner or later come to pass. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

To conclude on a more tentative note—and to attempt to give the last word to the nomads themselves—consider what foragers or pastoralists might make of these arguments (Ringmar, 2017). Surely, to nomadic peoples there can be no such thing as Nature since the natural requires the artificial and man-made as a contrasting term. Nature can only come into existence as juxtaposed with “convention,” *techne*, “city-life,” “civilization,” and so on. To nomadic peoples, nature is rather all there is. There is only one world, the world which provides for and nourishes us. To move away from this world and to put one’s trust in human artifice is surely a reckless enterprise.

As far as God is concerned, nomadic peoples are likely to remain skeptical. Anthropologists have often noticed how little interest nomadic peoples take in the notion of an all-powerful, transcendental being. This is true even of peoples, such as the Bedouins of Arabia or Iran, who are supposed to be good Muslims (Barth, 1961, p. 135). If you live in an

environment which constantly provides for you, you are not dependent on miracles; you are not subject to the sky—waiting and hoping for rain—and there is consequently no reason to obey those who claim to represent the sky’s powers. What nomads need are instead gods who give them enough responsibility to be able to solve problems for themselves. Consequently, as anthropologists have noted, many nomadic peoples do not seem to be afraid of death. When you are dead, they say, you are no more, and that is that (Alekseenko, 2000, p. 456; Turnbull, 1984, pp. 27–51). We were here before our births, as a part of the environment that can be seen all around us, and we will still be here after our deaths, as a part of the memories of our communities. It is only people who are separated from the world in which they live, and from their communities, who are fearful. And the more fearful you are, the more you need an all-powerful God to reassure you. The more powerful your God, the more you will come to live a life of subjection.

This is also the reason why the idea of History makes no sense to nomadic peoples. Stateless societies are “societies without history,” we are told, and the reason is that they have few or no written records. Yet, writing is more than anything a practice required by the state (Scott, 2017, pp. 139–149). States need writing in order to lay down the law, to communicate with officials and keep records. Besides, kings like their achievements to be remembered—how much land they conquered and how many enemies they slew. By anchoring our lives in texts, we no longer need to keep the knowledge in our heads. Yet, to live subject to a text is to live subject to an external object maintained by an external authority. Writing, from this point of view, is a part of the state’s system of control. For nomadic peoples, myths serve far better than history (Nandy, 1989, pp. 55–63). There is no need for them to lay things out or to see the unfolding of events as part of a progressive series. Myths, moreover, are an oral tradition, taught by the elders and kept alive by the community itself. To live subject to a myth is to live subject to a shared memory, of which each member is the custodian. Nomadic peoples have no use for political theory.

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