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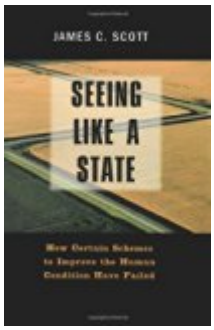
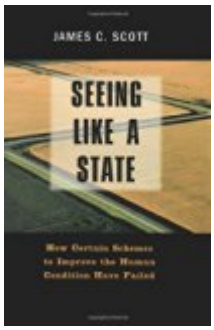


James C. Scott. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. xiv + 445 pp



James C. Scott. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998. xiv + 445 pp. $19.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-07815-2.

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The desirability, or otherwise, of state intervention is a long and hotly debated topic within a range of socio-economic areas. Among the questions that arise are how much a state should intervene in the lives of its citizens? How often should it undertake to engineer certain outcomes for its population? In social welfare, for example, key debates revolve around whether providing welfare recipients with state support creates further dependency and reduces their self-reliance. If the state intervened less, the argument goes, individuals would show more initiative and the kind of entrepreneurial spirit which is required for the health of our economic systems.

While these kinds of debates about the state continue, James C. Scott in Seeing Like a State is asking a prior question: how was it possible for the state to be able to intervene or attempt to engineer particular outcomes for populations? What conditions needed to exist for a 'state' to see its population and thus take the steps to intervene, or as Scott puts it: "How did the state gradually get a handle on its subjects and their environments?" (p.2), and secondly, once states were able to 'see' their subjects, why did they embark on so many massive social engineering schemes which, Scott considers, were spectacularly unsuccessful?

The answer lies in faith in a "high-modernist ideology" which permits the administrative ordering of both nature and society. High-modernism includes strong confidence in the progress of science, control and mastery over nature, and ratio-

nal planning of the social order. High modernists, Scott claims, such as Le Corbusier, Lenin, Trotsky and Nyerere "envisioned a sweeping, rational engineering of all aspects of social life in order to improve the human condition" (p.89). The state was able to use the power of its authority to coerce certain actions in the face of a weak civil society lacking the capacity to resist the plans of state action.

Scott establishes at the outset the kinds of conditions which make populations 'visible' or 'legible': permanent surnames, standardization of weights and measures, cadastral surveys, official languages and other forms of centralising capacities to list and 'see' citizens, to move them from the specific to the general; the local to the national. In the first eight chapters Scott weaves a pastiche of seemingly dissonant examples to paint a backdrop to his argument concerning the importance of recognising metis -- knowledge which is so much part of the common-sense heuristic it cannot be recounted, generalised, mapped or listed, for merely the listing of some aspects will immediately leave others behind.

To achieve his aim, Scott's examples of high modernist social engineering include diverse cases such as Soviet collectivization and Tanzanian ***ujamaa*** villages. The first two chapters illuminate the ways in which states established legibility and simplification concerning both nature and subjects. Chapter three discusses high modernism and its authoritian capacity. Chapters four and five examine the high-modernist city and Lenin's design for a revolutionary party respectively. Chapters six, seven and eight focus upon Soviet collectivization; compulsory villagization in Tanzania; and 'taming nature' - agricultural simplification and the transportation of the science of agronomy to other sites, with subsequent loss of local knowledge of farming practices. One of the problems with such a broad-brush approach to history is that much of the fine detail of the events is lost. Instead of a debate about the event, the event is taken as given and becomes the source of an entirely different argument. While this is likely to be the source of criticism from some historians, it does not detract from Scott's overall aim.

Scott continuously wishes us to realise that whenever social engineering takes place, what remains important is what we can no longer see. A map, when it is drawn, highlights the main features of a landscape, yet leaves behind many other aspects which might be vital to the local community. An old-growth forest destroyed and replaced by rationally-planted, scientifically-chosen, commercially-successful trees, will never be able to recapture the loss of local ecology -- the birds, ants, and activity of the forest floor stemming from diversity. An urban landscape is neatened and ordered by the destruction of slum areas, its residents placed in carefully planned, rationally designed, barren streetscapes miles from their original homes, the dense interlocking networks of their community destroyed. Whole societies can be planned and ordered (for their own benefit) -- with little recognition that key aspects of social cohesion stem from the very survival strategies the community had previously maintained.

In chapter nine, Scott reminds us of the importance of 'practical knowledge' which he terms "metis". Knowledge derived from high modernism has taken an "imperial" scientific approach "which dismisses practical know-how as insignificant at best and as dangerous superstititions at worst. The relation between scientific knowledge and practical knowledge is, as we shall see, part of a political struggle for institutional hegemony by experts and their institutions." (p.311). "Metis" or practical knowledge is derived from experience and common sense, which "is often so implicit and automatic that its bearer is at a loss to explain it." (p.329). Scott gives an example of a physician in the early nineteenth century who can disagnose syphilis, but not be able to say just what it is that allows him to "know" that a patient has this disease. This reminds me of the skill of the "chick-

en sexer" who is often a highly paid person with a heuristic ability to "know" the sex of chickens, or of the difficulty in building a computer with sufficient brute force to beat the heuristic skill of a human at chess.

In one of many fascinating examples, Scott describes a village in Malaysia where a mango tree is being eaten by red ants. An old villager saved the tree by introducing black ants in a complex process of bringing particular leaves to the black ants which would encourage them to lay eggs, moving the leaves to the base of the affected mango tree, and waiting for them black ants to eat the red. All of this activity requires complex knowledge: the diet, habitat and behaviour of red ants and black ants, the leaves in which the black ants would lay eggs and thus supply a moveable egg chamber (p.334). Imagine if the villager had been able to access a can of pesticide -- the problem might have been solved in minutes (to some extent) but the result would be loss of complex ecological knowledge.

Scott highlights just how much the loss of mÈtis constitutes an inability to go back. When we find that the results of high-modernist social or natural engineering are leading to damage which we subsequently wish to undo, it is too late, for the local knowledge and conditions have been lost. The forest cannot be engineered back to its original life, the pesticide using villager will forget the ecological skills of ant behaviour which allowed him to find a natural solution to the problem. The social capital lost through slum clearance cannot be regenerated in new housing estates. Yet Scott is not making an argument for engineering to be resisted, but accommodated within a climate of "mÈtis-friendly" institutions, with a number of prescriptions for enabling change to be more accommodating. These prescriptions are well known to policy analysts surprised by the failure of their more grandiose schemes at the level of implementation: take small steps; favor reversability; plan on suprises; plan on human inventiveness (p.345).

Overall, the message is to value complexity and beware of simplifications which eliminate diversity. Beware of high-modernist planners who were/are guilty of "forgetting that they were mortals and acting as if they were gods" (p.342): a good message as we move into an age of genetically engineered food products with consequences we will not know for more generations. Scott's book provides a lesson in what gives states the capacity for legibility, the capacity for engineering, and the inability to easily redress the worst outcomes of their high-handed optimism.

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