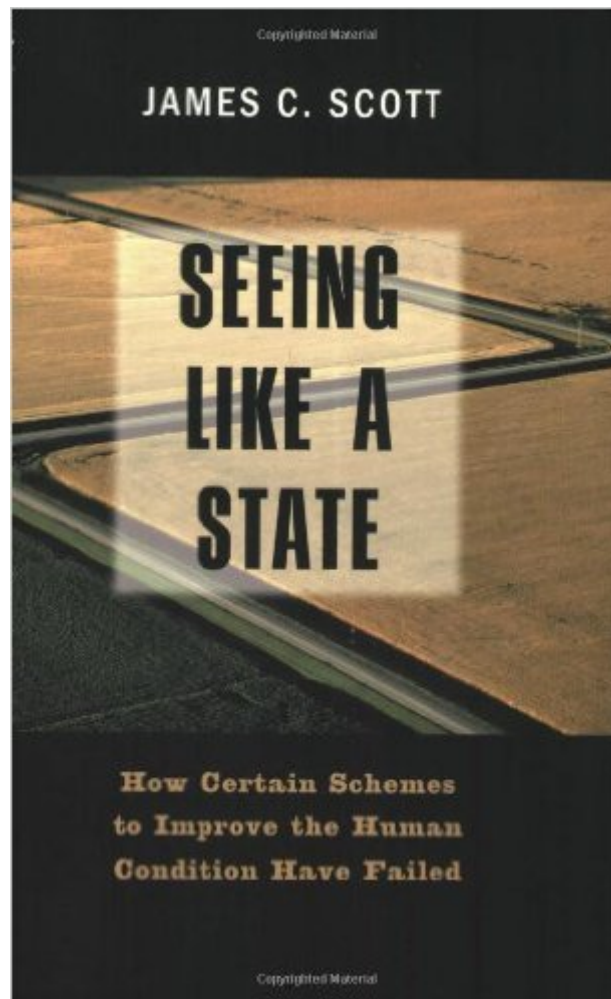


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Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes To Improve The Human Condition Have Failed



Synopsis

In this wide-ranging and original book, James C. Scott analyzes failed cases of large-scale authoritarian plans in a variety of fields. He argues that centrally managed social plans derail when they impose schematic visions that do violence to complex interdependencies that are not -- and cannot be -- fully understood. Further the success of designs for social organization depends on the recognition that local, practical knowledge is as important as formal, epistemic knowledge. The author builds a persuasive case against "development theory" and imperialistic state planning that disregards the values, desires, and objections of its subjects. And in discussing these planning disasters, he identifies four conditions common to them all: the state's attempt to impose administrative order on nature and society; a high-modernist ideology that believes scientific intervention can improve every aspect of human life; a willingness to use authoritarian state power to effect large-scale innovations; and a prostrate civil society that cannot effectively resist such plans.

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Customer Reviews

James Scott is known for portraying the moral world of peasants, showing how they have resisted the encroachment of capitalism and the state. Now he investigates the other side: the experts, bureaucrats, and revolutionaries whose grandiose schemes to improve the human condition have inflicted untold misery on the twentieth century. Seeing Like a State can be read, along with Foucault's Discipline and Punish and James Ferguson's The Anti-Politics Machine, as a classic of

'structural dysfunctionism.' The point (put metaphorically) is not merely that the cure for social ills has proven inadequate-but that the disease inhered in the diagnosis, and that failure will continue so long as the doctors prevail. The dysfunction, Scott argues, derived from three modern conditions. One was the ambition to remake society (and ecology) to conform to a rational plan. It is the conviction-expressed by such varied characters as Robert Owen, Le Corbusier, and Mao (pp. 117, 341)-that the present is a blank sheet, to be inscribed at will. Putting this into effect required a second condition: comprehensive information about individuals and property, gathered by a centralized bureaucracy. The third condition, what made the combination lethal, was a state sufficiently powerful to force its radically rational schemes on their 'beneficiaries.' This was characteristic of post-revolutionary and post-colonial regimes, and so the book devotes chapters to collectivization in the Soviet Union and ujamaa 'villagization' in Tanzania. But the basic vision, Scott emphasizes, was common to experts everywhere. Three Americans planned a Soviet sovkhos in their Chicago hotel room; a democratic populist built Brasília, which is also accorded a chapter.

This is one of the most brilliant and inspiring books that I've read in a long time. James C. Scott's thesis is that states, driven by both the need to make the societies they govern legible for tax and control purposes, and by an ideology and aesthetic that equates functional order and progress with real order, systematically transform social realities. Moreover, they often do this to the detriment of their peoples and bring about long-term damage to the environment. One important human loss in this process is the erosion of practical skills and local knowledge in the face of a hegemony of scientific knowledge and educated technical expertise. It would be hard to do justice to Scott's work in a few lines. He illustrates his thesis with a variety of case studies: Enlightenment scientific forestry, modernist town planning inspired by Le Corbusier, the disagreement between Lenin and Luxemburg on revolutionary agency, Soviet collectivisation of agriculture, compulsory villagisation in Tanzania and agriculture in the Third World. The whole amounts to a pretty devastating critique of a whole way of looking at the world, a top-down modernist perspective that ignores the lived experience and judgement of those whose interests are supposedly being furthered. Some might think that Scott's message is old news, a rehash of Hayekian critiques of central planning. Whilst there are many points in common, Scott is addressing a wider syndrome. The practical judgement, skill and local knowledge of peasants, educators, workers and those in many other walks of life, is at risk not only from state bureaucrats but also from the global capitalist market.

Brad DeLong's featured review is basically correct - Scott is treading ground remarkably similar to

Hayek's. But I don't think that Scott is ignorant of Hayek. Rather, Scott is attempting to explore the same territory, but without coming to the same political conclusions. Early in this book, Scott makes clear that he is not advocating libertarianism (I am told that Scott calls himself an anarchist). He is aiming at a deeper critique of planning, one which is not merely about prices or information, but about metaphysics, epistemology and phenomenology. Scott never makes it explicit, but throughout this book, I got the sense that he is doing continental philosophy. This is a Heideggerian critique of planning - one that just happens to cover some of the same ground as Hayek. Scott's focus is on "seeing" like a (high modernist) state; the question this book asks is: how does such a state see, and what does state-like perception systematically miss? Scott argues the state's vision is limited to the conscious, the rational, and the abstract - it cannot see beyond what Nassim Nicholas Taleb has called "the Platonic fold." (See *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*) This vision is identical to what continental philosophers refer to as the "objective gaze." The unconscious, the organic, the ecological and the folk-wise are invisible to the modernist bureaucracy. To make these invisible elements rationally "legible," the state reaches out and actively reduces them to known quantities. This allows the state some limited control over them, but in the process any emergent systematic properties are destroyed.

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