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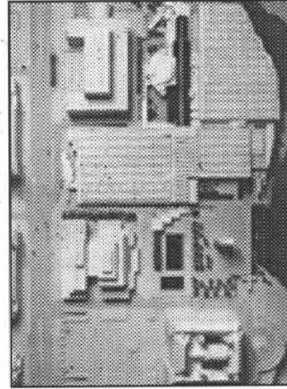
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## Blind Ambition

**Seeing Like a State:  
How Certain Schemes  
to Improve the Human  
Condition Have Failed**  
by James C. Scott

**Fred Murphy**



A View of Clifford Wiens's model of a new National Gallery of Canada. From *How to Photograph Buildings and Interiors* by Gerry Kopelow; listed in ART & ARCHITECTURE

"To be ruled is to be kept an eye on," said the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon—"inspected, spied on, regulated, indoctrinated, sermonized, listed and checked off, estimated, appraised, censured, ordered about...To be ruled is at every operation, transaction, movement, to be noted, registered, counted, priced, admonished, prevented, reformed, corrected." In *Seeing Like a State*, the Yale anthropologist and historian of peasant movements James Scott provides an extensive gloss on Proudhon's aphorism and considers the tragic consequences that have ensued time and again in the 20th century when rulers with the capacity to monitor human populations in such ways have embarked on grandiose projects to reshape social and economic arrangements.

Scott's initial chapters sketch the rise of the modern state and the development of its capacity and inclination to measure, standardize, and make "legible" its subjects and their activities. He discusses and links convincingly to this state project such disparate phenomena as "the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishments of cadastral surveys and population registers, the invention of freehold tenure, the standardization of language and legal discourse, the design of cities and the organization of transportation." In order to maximize the extraction of material and human resources through taxation and military conscription, rulers not only

compile information but actively reshape their population in ways that render them more transparent and manageable. "Thus categories that may have begun as the artificial invention of cadastral surveyors, census takers, judges, or police officers can end by becoming categories that organize people's daily experience precisely because they are embedded in the state-created institutions that structure that experience." The more powerful the authoritarian state, the greater its ability and determination to make "fictitious facts-on-paper" such as ethnic classification or land ownership prevail on the ground: "it is on behalf of such pieces of paper that police and army are deployed."

In all this Scott is mainly elaborating and synthesizing concepts developed by state theorists and historians such as Charles Tilly or Allan Pred. The central contribution of this book, however, is Scott's identification of the conditions and state practices common to such 20th-century catastrophes as Stalinist collectivization, the US devastation of the Vietnamese countryside, or the Ethiopian famine of the 1970s. In each of these episodes, the state's ongoing effort to impose administrative order on nature and society reflected what Scott calls a "high modernist" ideology among state officials. They believed in the scientific superiority of their own plans and denigrated the practical knowledge possessed by their subjects. Such faith in the "use of state power to bring about huge, utopian changes in people's work habits, living patterns, moral conduct and worldview" sprang initially from the feats of national mobilization in World War I (especially in Germany under Walter Rathenau) and became especially prevalent among planners, engineers, architects, scientists, and technicians.

To bring such high modernist aims to fruition, though, it is also necessary to have established a dominating state that is willing and able to use its coercive power. Emergency conditions such as war, revolution, economic depression, or the struggle for national liberation foster the seizure of such emergency powers while furthering the prostration of civil society. A population weakened through warfare or economic collapse is both less able to collectively resist state imposition and more willing to accept radical attempts to redress its situation.

But why, finally, do high modernist projects so often fail or lead to disaster? At bottom, Scott asserts, because their practitioners fail utterly to take into account "the indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes and improvisation in the face of unpredictability." Such knowledge, Scott calls *metis*, a classical Greek term usually translated inadequately as "cunning." *Metis*

"represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment"; such skills are largely implicit and are "exceptionally difficult to teach, apart from engaging in the activity itself." And they have historically been inaccessible to, and subject to the scorn of, university trained planners and technocrats who formulate and implement high modernist agendas. Thus where grandiose state schemes have gone awry their proponents have typically "regarded themselves as far smarter and farseeing than they really are and, at the same time, regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than *they* really were."

Scott's conclusion is not that all large-scale efforts at societal progress are illusory and doomed to fail. He acknowledges the durable benefits of many state projects, such as public-health efforts to curb epidemics and eliminate deadly disease. Nor is he an advocate of the unfettered capitalist market, faith in which has become as fetishistic and pernicious as earlier high modernist statism. Rather, Scott wants to make a case for "*metis*-friendly institutions" and for greater humility on the part of social reformers and planners. Advocates of planned or legislated social change need constantly to test a project by asking, "To what degree does it promise to enhance the skill, knowledge and responsibility of those who are a part of it?"

In *Seeing Like a State* James Scott has given us powerful new paradigms of state action and popular resistance. His work is sure to inspire new thinking and research in history and the social sciences.

**Fred Murphy** has studied and taught in the Committee on Historical Studies at the New School for Social Research.

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