On Benign and Disastrous State Action, review of "Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed"

Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Brown University

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On Benign and Disastrous State Action


Given their comparative advantage in the deployment of coercion, states have unique opportunities to overcome collective action problems. Threatening to punish unwilling participants in collective efforts—and possibly rewarding volunteers—states can achieve large-scale results that uncoordinated individuals and small groups would well fail to reach. The futility of the efforts of a single person or a small group keeps even many people with an interest in the outcome from cooperating. Free riders calculate that voluntary cooperation does not “pay” because a successful collective venture would benefit them anyway, even without their contribution.

The use of coercion is a blunt instrument. Therefore states invariably seek to obtain compliance with only the threat of violence. Beyond that, states try to garner the loyal support of the more influential among their subjects, support they seek to ground as much as possible in the moral conceptions and norms of daily life. In other words, all states seek to “legitimate” their rule. “Experience shows,” argued Max Weber in his first volume of *Economy and Society*, “that in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition, every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy” (p. 213). Nevertheless, the threat of coercion is a distinctive resource of states, and an indispensable one.

Even states that possess a functioning apparatus of rule with more or less strong legitimacy do not necessarily create “collective goods.” They may well use the same resources that allow them to overcome the collective action problem to achieve results that by many standards must be judged “collective disasters.” This is not only because state elites may serve their own interests or those of their allies at the expense of the interests of others and perhaps of the majority of the population they rule. It can equally be the result of mistaken assumptions and an insensitivity to policy failures. Ill-founded theories and
inadequate feedback are particularly likely if the problems tackled require complex local intelligence and if, as is often the case, state elites are insulated from information about adverse outcomes.

Recent decades have seen large shifts in opinion about the likelihood that state action can benefit society. The great optimism that followed the end of the Great Depression and Allied victory in World War II was replaced by growing disillusionment with the state beginning in the 1970s. Even if neoliberal critiques of the state have perhaps passed their zenith, the prevailing attitude remains one of profound skepticism and even suspicion. James Scott’s new book, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, fits into this intellectual environment. But it does so with a difference. His is not a simple (neo- or paleo-) liberal perspective; rather, it is informed by research on the oldest objects and often victims of state action—of peasants and farmers in European history, in early-twentieth-century Russia, and in the late-twentieth-century third world.

Scott, one of the foremost analysts of peasant life and the extreme power relations it often entails, established together with Eric Wolf and Eric Hobsbawm the “moral economy” model of understanding peasant life. Faced with repeated threats to their physical livelihood, peasants in most precapitalist societies developed a “subsistence ethic”:

Patterns of reciprocity, forced generosity, communal land, and work-sharing helped to even out the inevitable troughs in a family’s resources which might otherwise have thrown them below subsistence. The proven value of these techniques and social patterns is perhaps what has given peasants a Brechtian tenacity in the face of agronomists and social workers who come from the capital to improve them.

This formulation from Scott’s pathbreaking The Moral Economy of the Peasant (p. 3) foreshadows in part the thrust of his latest book on the state.

Seeing Like a State begins with a parable from forestry. Early modern states in the German territories created “scientific forestry” by developing a system of counting the harvestable amount of wood in the state forests. Also, the new “forest science and geometry, backed by state power, had the capacity to transform the real, diverse, and chaotic old-growth forest into a new, more uniform forest that closely resembled the administrative grid of its techniques.” Trees of a few species, all of the same age, stood in straight rows on large areas, ready to be harvested at a predictable time. As Scott argued, “At the limit, the forest itself would not even have to be seen; it could be ‘read’ accurately from the tables and maps in the forester’s office” (p. 15).

States, so the first major argument of the book holds, do the same to society. Through census taking, insistence on family names, uniform property and contract legislation, standardization of measures and weights, restructuring of cities and towns, and creation of an official language, states not only make society
legible and visible from a distance, they also transform it in the interests of control. Scott grants that such a transformation of social life may also be liberating: “The state . . . is the vexed institution that is the ground of both our freedoms and our unfreedoms” (p. 7). A marvelous section on the transformation of weights and measures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France leaves no doubt that the diverse measures before the state’s standardization served the interests of the privileged: “Every act of measurement was an act marked by the play of power relations” (p. 27). Nevertheless, the focus of the book is on the other, darker side of the state’s efforts to make society visible and to transform it in standardized ways to increase the chances of surveillance and control.

The next element that Scott argues is responsible for state-sponsored collective disasters is “authoritarian high modernism” — the supremely confident belief that scientific and technical progress can transform every field of human life. Le Corbusier and the unsuccessful high-modernist city of Brasilia represent a first instance of this faith, Lenin and his revolutionary party a second. Both rejected the complexity and unpredictability of actual social life and insisted on creating new, more “scientific” forms on a huge scale. Their critics denounced the bent on simplification and planning as inhumane. Jane Jacobs offered an alternative vision of the livable city that emphasized the diversity of needs and the rich complexity resulting from multiple uses of the same spaces. Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai insisted on initiatives from below and a respect for the open character of history as integral to their view of revolution.

High modernism grew out of the tremendous advances of science and technology in the last 150 years. It invokes the authority of the expert, often in a stylized, utopian fashion. Scott’s critique denies neither the validity of scientific investigation nor the benefits science and technology have delivered. But he insists that any application of scientific results requires knowledge of local conditions and an appreciation of the interaction of multiple factors of which only some are fully understood. This limitation in the use of universal knowledge about special facets of reality is often overlooked; it is obliterated in the utopian schemes of high modernism. Practical knowledge about local conditions and the interaction of many factors, often implicit and a matter of “judgment,” is highly developed in cultures built in response to harsh scarcities. The importance of practical knowledge is brought out in a separate chapter that links it to the inherent complexity of human social life.

The state’s interest in making society “legible” and manageable, and high modernism’s disregard for complexity and unpredictability, become thoroughly noxious when they are joined by two other conditions: an authoritarian state bent on transforming society and a weak civil society unable to resist these policies. The effects of this combination are examined in chapters on Soviet collectivization and compulsory villagization in Tanzania. These are interesting discussions full of insights and surprising information. The treatment of Soviet
collectivization begins with direct links between American theories of industrial agriculture and the planning of huge mechanized farms in Russia. It also elucidates the multiple ways in which forced collectivization was shaped by the social dislocations of war, revolution, and civil war.

This is a fascinating and most original book about the state. The brief description offered here can only hint at the absorbing richness of its chapters. Yet it is also a book open to many questions. If Soviet collectivization is the clearest example of “how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed,” it is also far removed from the simpler consequences of “seeing like the state.” Where all four conditions come together, as they do most clearly in the case of Soviet collectivization, the outcome is indeed dismal. But it is also an outcome that holds few surprises. It is when the concatenation of the four conditions is relaxed, and when allowance is made for gradations in these conditions, that many interesting and more complex questions arise. Many developments examined in these pages exhibit variation in the causal conditions, but this remains undertheorized. Overall, Scott gives much less attention to the effects of a transformative authoritarian state and a weak civil society than to the other two conditions of state-made disaster. That may be justified because the issues of high modernism and of states making society “legible” have received much less attention elsewhere. Yet it may also be that authoritarian state power and a weak and—equally important—one-sided self-organization of society have greater explanatory power.

A related question points to problems of selecting cases on the dependent variable. What are the consequences of looking only at cases where certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed, as opposed to cases that share similar features thought of as the major relevant causal factors? The Scandinavian welfare states illustrate both of these points.

The emergence of comprehensive welfare states is surely one of the more gigantic and long-sustained series of society-transforming state actions. The vast majority of the citizens of these states consider it a great success, fights about details aside. There is no doubt that one requirement for these interventions was a greatly increased “legibility” of society, as Stein Kuhnle has recently shown for Scandinavia in his chapter in States, Social Knowledge, and the Origins of Modern Social Policies. There is also little doubt that welfare state policies were often informed by the “authoritarian high modernism” of experts bent on changing social conditions and transforming people’s behavior, as current Scandinavian discussions—for instance, the reevaluations of the role of the Myrdals—make clear. A pattern of very active social participation sets the Scandinavian countries apart from the cases discussed by Scott. This also applies to the early democratic developments in Norway and Sweden, even though these very strong but open states later turned toward what many critics have diagnosed as expert rule, grounded in corporatist cooperation with the major interest groups.
Other grand state-sponsored attempt to improve the human condition are today’s market reforms in postcommunist eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The neoliberal prescriptions certainly fit the description of “high modernism,” and the self-organization of societal interests is weak. Judging these reforms as successes or failures must be provisional, varies across countries, and depends on whose interests are taken as criteria. Yet a good case can be made that an effective institutional infrastructure capable of “seeing like the state” is a major advantage, one weakly present across the region and sorely missing in the worst-off countries. A state that is autonomous vis-à-vis powerful groups, though responsive to an emergent, broader-based, self-organization of society, may be able to lay and defend an infrastructure and system of regulation that seems required to articulate the market mechanism with social structures and conditions to the satisfaction of the majority of these populations.

Some of the outcomes attributed to the state’s reordering of society actually have an alternative source—the capitalist market—which will surprise only readers unschooled in elementary social science. Scott is quite aware of this: “Large-scale capitalism is just as much an agency of homogenization, uniformity, grids, and heroic simplification as the state is” (p. 8). Neither the title of the book nor the thrust of its arguments highlights this fact. If, with some qualifications, Scott sees the market as a corrective of state power, he fails to analyze the ways in which state action limits the destructive impact of the market.

This is a book written with intelligence, passion, and elegance. It offers one of the most innovative discussions of the modern state to date. But it is also an uneven book, uneven in the selection of cases and in its conclusions. Yet it is a contribution that nobody interested in the comparative study of states can overlook.

REFERENCES


—Dietrich Rueschemeyer
Brown University