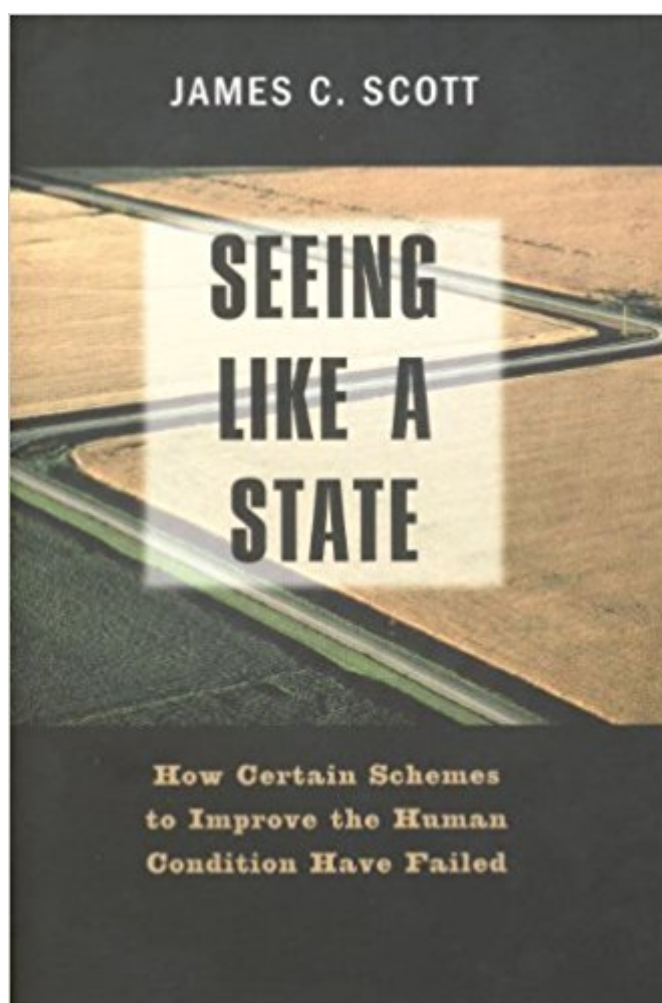


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Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes To Improve The Human Condition Have Failed (The Institution For Social And Policy St)



Synopsis

Compulsory ujamaa villages in Tanzania, collectivization in Russia, Le Corbusier's urban planning theory realized in Brasilia, the Great Leap Forward in China, agricultural "modernization" in the Tropics—the twentieth century has been racked by grand utopian schemes that have inadvertently brought death and disruption to millions. Why do well-intentioned plans for improving the human condition go tragically awry? In this wide-ranging and original book, James C. Scott analyzes failed cases of large-scale authoritarian plans in a variety of fields. Centrally managed social plans misfire, Scott argues, 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 upon 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. He identifies and discusses four conditions common to all planning disasters: administrative ordering of nature and society by the state; a "high-modernist ideology" that places confidence in the ability of science to improve every aspect of human life; a willingness to use authoritarian state power to effect large-scale interventions; and a prostrate civil society that cannot effectively resist such plans.

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Customer Reviews

In a world where governments continually seek to invade personal privacy, control the elements, clump humanity into categories and relentlessly attempt to socially engineer their populations, Scott seeks to make sense of the situation by explaining the why and how behind governmental actions, making "the case for the indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability." Perhaps Scott sums it up best when he says, "Much of this book can be read as a case against the imperialism of high modernist, planned social order." Every part of this book is clear and concise. This is a rare gem among modern academia.

Insightful, though it's not for everybody. An extended discussion about how government agencies shape the world to accomplish their ends, Very much about the law of unintended consequences. I am no scholar, so I cannot debate his thesis , but I find this book has changed the way way I look at the world, and particularly, the character of government.

It's an interesting book but it's way too verbose, he should have edited out about a third of the text. It's a fairly simple thesis but he makes it overly complicated by repeatedly making the same point with multiple examples... how many trees must die in vain?

This book is essentially a series of discussions of how the perceptual gaps of state apparatus lead to specific sorts of problems, especially when the state attempts to perform large scale, society-changing work. While the book is written by a man who could be reasonably described as a minarchist, it's exceptionally useful to big-state left wing socialists, such as myself, who value understanding why this sort of thing has failed, and failed so badly, in the past. In addition to the educational value, it is an absolute page turner, filled with exciting historical moments that will be brand new to most American readers. I heartily recommend it to anyone.

Back in my freshmen days at Johns Hopkins, I rebelled at the focus of "Political Science". It was basically all about how the system worked and was rather obviously instructing us in how to accomplish what the system wants while working within the system and, of course, as a political staffer, keeping your local congress critter in office and out of trouble. In short it was training us - as I only recently discovered when I read this book - to "See like a State". In the words of the author: "The more I examined these efforts at sedentarization, the more I came to see them as a state's attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion. Having begun to think in these terms, I began to see legibility as a central problem in statecraft. The pre-modern state was, in many crucial respects, particularly blind; it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity. It lacked anything like a detailed map of its terrain and its people." And in the words of a review on the "RibbonFarm" web site: "The book is about the 2-3 century long process by which modern states reorganized the societies they governed, to make them more legible to the apparatus of governance. The state is not actually interested in the rich functional structure and complex behavior of the very organic entities that it governs (and indeed, is part of, rather than "above" them). It merely views them as resources that must be organized in order to yield optimal returns according to a centralized, narrow, and strictly utilitarian logic." Scott's idea is a relatively simple one of overpowering importance. Most politically motivated citizens tend to place perceived problems in ideological frames. But once exposed to Scott's "legibility" insight you see that most governmental decisions are made under significant restraints that tend to preclude ideology. Thus, Scott's examples of limits of governmental "legibility" are all rather dull and unexciting. He steers clear of the most interesting and controversial applications of his insight. Once you understand Scott's insight it is easy to understand why nobody in government wants to restrain NSA eavesdropping on every electronic communication. It also explains why virtually all political regimes that begin as "democracies" have been transformed into oligarchies ruled by billionaires with voting choice limited to pre-selected candidates and with government bureaus captured by oligarch interests and becoming so large and complex as to be "illegible" to those with formal oversight authority over them. Large corporations also tend to "see like a state" and if you want to climb the corporate ladder, understanding the implications of Scott's work will be very helpful. Similarly, it becomes obvious why all welfare states end up pursuing disgenic policies that subsidize births to low IQ parents and encourage low IQ immigration from groups with wildly different constituent characteristics than the pre-existing population of the recipient country. This

book is every bit as important as Joseph Tainter's classic "The collapse of complex societies" and indeed stands as a companion piece in a sense as the "legibility" limitations inevitably will inform the process of collapse.

This is the most Hayekian, anti-planning, "decision-making works better when it is decentralized" book I have ever read. The author's understanding of free markets and Hayek is naive and superficial. He seems, for example, to think real businesses actually used, and could get away with using, the ideas of Frederick Taylor. Never the less, the bulk of the analysis is powerful endorsement for the system of trial and error experiment that created our modern standard of living.

Excellent read. Novel. It is a very clarifying and educational book. I did not know about the state assigning last names to better ID, tax and conscript people long ago. The efforts of the state and some intellectuals to force people and cities into 'rational' planned systems is very old it seems. The plan to remake Paris with a more 'rational' street layout was both unbelievable and horrifying. I did not sense any ideological slant to the book. The book is mostly about 'Seeing Like a State' and less about such failures which is good because failures are described in other books. NN Taleb writes about related ideas in a different way. He also writes about bottom up 'bricolage' systems as opposed to top down controlled systems.

Superbly written, addressing a deep subject comprehensively and with freshness. Scott has imagination, historical knowledge, a sense of politics, and is dogged about evidence. He makes the reader feel smarter, newly knowledgeable -- and envious of how well he does it. On my Kindle Seeing Like A State made a long flight much shorter. And the Kindle was more comfortable to handle than a full book, especially in economy seating. This book seemed a great way to tune out the US election for a few hours, except that the "ancient history" it discusses fully resonates with the debates of the campaign.

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