

An aerial photograph of a large, rectangular, man-made water reservoir or canal system. The water is a dark, still blue-grey color, contrasting sharply with the surrounding dry, brown, and textured landscape. The reservoir has a distinct rectangular shape with rounded corners, and a narrow channel or road runs along its perimeter. The overall scene suggests a large-scale engineering project in an arid region.

JAMES C. SCOTT

# SEEING LIKE A STATE

**How Certain Schemes  
to Improve the Human  
Condition Have Failed**

# Seeing Like a State

---

*How Certain Schemes to  
Improve the Human  
Condition Have Failed*

**James C. Scott**

Yale University Press  
New Haven and London

This is a book in the Yale Agrarian Studies Series, James C. Scott, series editor.

Copyright © 1998 by Yale University.

All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Aster type by Running Feet Books, Durham, NC.  
Printed in the United States of America by Vail-Ballou Press, Binghamton, New York.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Scott, James C.

Seeing like a state : how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed / James C. Scott.

p. cm.—(Yale agrarian studies) (The Yale ISPS series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-07016-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

0-300-07815-3 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Central planning—Social aspects. 2. Social engineering. 3. Authoritarianism.

I. Title. II. Series. III. Series: The Yale ISPS series.

HD87.5.S365 1998

338.9—dc21

97-26556

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

**The Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University**

**The Yale ISPS Series**

*For Louise, again, always*

OWEN: What is happening?

YOLLAND: I'm not sure. But I'm concerned about my part in it. It's an eviction of sorts.

OWEN: We're making a six-inch map of the country. Is there something sinister in that?

YOLLAND: Not in . . .

OWEN: And we're taking place names that are riddled with confusion and . . .

YOLLAND: Who's confused? Are the people confused?

OWEN: And we're standardising those names as accurately and as sensitively as we can.

YOLLAND: Something is being eroded.

—Brian Friel, *Translations* 2.1

# Acknowledgments

---

This book has been longer in the making than I would care to admit. It would be nice to be able to claim that it just took that long to think it through. Nice, but not truthful. A nearly fatal combination of malingering and administrative chores accounts for part of the delay. For the rest, the scope of the book simply expanded, in an academic version of Parkinson's Law, to fill all the space that I would give to it. Finally, I had to call an arbitrary halt or else start thinking of it as a life's work.

The scope of the book together with the time it took to complete it explain the long list of intellectual debts I have accumulated along the way. A full accounting of them would be interminable except for the fact that I realize some of my creditors would just as soon not be associated with the final product. Though I shall not implicate them here, I owe them nonetheless. Instead of turning my argument in the direction they urged, I took their criticisms to heart by fortifying my case so that it would better answer their objections. My other intellectual creditors, having failed to disavow the final product in advance, will be named here and, it is to be hoped, implicated.

Some of my debts are to institutions. I spent the 1990–91 academic year at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin as a recipient of their hospitality and largesse. The temptation of living for a time in Berlin, just a year after the Wall came down, proved irresistible. After physically laboring for six weeks on an ex-collective farm on the Mecklenburg Plain in eastern Germany (an alternative that I dreamed up to avoid sitting for six weeks in Goethe Institute classes with pimply teenagers), I hurled myself at the German language, Berlin, and my German col-

leagues. My research hardly advanced in any formal sense, but I realize that many fruitful lines of inquiry opened up then. I want particularly to thank Wolf Lepenies, Reinhard Prasser, Joachim Nettlebeck, Barbara Sanders, Barbara Golf, Christine Klohn, and Gerhard Riedel for their many kindnesses. The intellectual boon companionship of Georg Elwert, my local patron saint, as well as that of Shalini Rande-ria, Gabor Klaniczay, Christoph Harbsmeier, Barbara Lane, Mitchell Ash, Juan Linz, Jochen Blaschke, Arthur von Mehren, Akim von Oppen, Hans Luther, Carola Lenz, Gerd Spittler, Hans Medick, and Alf Lüdke opened my eyes to lines of inquiry that proved formative. Only the great efforts and unfailing friendship of Heinz Lechleiter and Ursula Hess brought my German to a (barely) tolerable level.

At various stages in the laborious preparation of this book, I had the privilege of making extended visits to institutions filled with large-spirited but skeptical colleagues. My good luck was that they so often made a project of straightening me out. They might not be satisfied with the final result, but I'll bet that they can see their influence at work. At the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Marseille, I especially want to thank my patron, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, Thomas Bierschenk, and their colleagues in the staff seminar. Living in Le Vieux Panier and working every day in the magnificent atmosphere of La Vielle Charité were unforgettable experiences. At the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra, I had the benefit of an unmatched crowd of humanists and Asian specialists looking over my shoulder. Thanks go in particular to Graeme Clark, director, and Iain McCalman, associate director, who invited me, and to Tony Reid and David Kelly, who organized the conference, "Ideas of Freedom in Asia," which was the premise of my visit. Tony Milner and Claire Milner, Ranajit Guha (my guru) and Mechthild Guha, Bob Goodin and Diane Gibson, Ben Tria Kerkvliet and Melinda Tria, Bill Jenner, Ian Wilson, and John Walker in various ways made my stay convivial and intellectually rewarding.

This book would definitely have been much longer in the making were it not for the fact that Dick Ohmann and Betsy Traube invited me to spend the academic year of 1994–95 as a fellow of the Center for Humanities at Wesleyan University. My colleagues there and our weekly seminars together were intellectually bracing, thanks in large part to Betsy Traube's capacity to frame each paper brilliantly. The center's ideal combination of solitude and a staff that could not have been more helpful allowed me to finish a first draft of the entire manuscript. I am enormously grateful to Pat Camden and Jackie Rich for their inexhaustible fund of kindnesses. The astute insights of Betsy Traube and Khachig



Tololyan mark this work in many ways. Thanks also to Bill Cohen, Peter Rutland, and Judith Goldstein.

I would not have had the leisure for reflection and writing in 1994–95 had it not been for generous grants from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation (Research for Understanding and Reducing Violence, Aggression, and Dominance) and a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Peace and Security Program Fellowship. But for their confidence in my work and their assistance, which made possible a respite from all administrative and teaching chores, I wouldn't have had a prayer of finishing this study when I did.

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues in the Netherlands and at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research for the opportunity of visiting there in order to give the Sixth Annual W. F. Wertheim Lecture: Jan Breman, Bram de Swaan, Hans Sonneveld, Otto van den Muijzenberg, Anton Blok, Rod Aya, Roseanne Rutten, Johan Goudsblom, Jan-Willem Duyvendak, Ido de Haan, Johan Heilbron, Jose Komen, Karin Peperkamp, Niels Mulder, Frans Hüsken, Ben White, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Franz von Benda-Beckmann, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann. Having Wim Wertheim there to offer advice and criticism was a great privilege for me, for I have admired his many contributions to social science theory and Southeast Asian studies. I learned at least as much from the thesis-writing graduate students in my seminar there as they learned from me; Talja Potters and Peer Smets were kind enough to read my chapter on urban planning and provide searching critiques.

There are a good many scholars whose writings opened up new perspectives for me or provided outstanding analyses of issues that I could not have hoped to study so comprehensively on my own. Some of them have not seen this work, some of them I have never met, and some of them would probably want to disown what I have written. Nevertheless, I will venture to acknowledge my heavy intellectual debts to them all: Edward Friedman, Ben Anderson, Michael Adas, Teodor Shanin, James Ferguson, and Zygmunt Bauman. I could not have written the chapter on the high-modernist city without taking shameless advantage of the insights of James Holston's fine book on Brasília. The chapter on Soviet collectivization and its connection with industrial agriculture in the United States leans heavily on the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick and Deborah Fitzgerald. I thank Sheila Fitzpatrick for her searching comments, only a few of which are adequately reflected in the finished chapter.

The elaboration of the concept of *mētis* I owe to Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant. Although our terminology differs, Stephen

Marglin and I had, unbeknownst to one another, been taking separate trains to roughly the same destination. Thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation, Marglin organized a conference, "The Greening of Economics," in Bellagio, Italy, where I had my first opportunity to present some of my initial ideas, and Marglin's work on episteme and techne as well as his work on agriculture have influenced my thinking. Stephen Gude-man's perceptive comments, Frédérique Apffel Marglin's work on "var-*iolation*," and Arun Agrawal's work and commentary have helped to shape my sense of practical knowledge. Chapter 8, which is about agriculture, bears the distinct marks of all that I have learned from the work of Paul Richards and from Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. I am an amateur as an Africanist, and the chapter on *ujamaa* villages in Tanzania owes a great deal to Joel Gao Hiza, who wrote a brilliant senior honors thesis on the subject while at Yale University and who generously shared his voluminous research materials. (He is now finishing a thesis in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley.) Bruce McKim, Ron Aminzade, Goran Hyden, David Sperling, and Allen Isaacman read the chapter on Tanzania and saved me from some blunders; some undoubtedly remain despite their efforts. Birgit Müller's fine analysis of the role of "fixers and traders" in the East German factory economy before unification helped me to understand the symbiotic relationship between planned order and informal arrangements.

Larry Lohmann and James Ferguson read an early draft of the manuscript and made comments that clarified my thinking enormously and prevented some serious missteps. A few other good friends offered to read all or part of the manuscript, in spite of its forbidding length. Those who rolled their eyes when offering or whose body language suggested mixed feelings, I avoided burdening. The few who genuinely wanted to read it, or whose feigned interest was completely convincing, in every case provided a set of comments that shaped the book in important ways. I owe an enormous debt and my warmest thanks to Ron Herring, Ramachandra Guha, Zygmunt Bauman, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Mark Lendler, Allan Isaacman, and Peter Vandergeest.

A great many thoughtful colleagues made useful criticisms or brought to my attention work that contributed to improvements in the argument and evidence. They include Arjun Appadurai, Ken Alder, Gregory Kasza, Daniel Goldhagen, Erich Goldhagen, Peter Perdue, Esther Kingston-Mann, Peter Sahlins, Anna Selenyi, Doug Gallon, and Jane Mansbridge. I also thank Sugata Bose, Al McCoy, Richard Landes, Gloria Raheja, Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, Jess Gilbert, Tongchai Winichakul, Dan Kelliher, Dan Little, Jack Kloppenberg, Tony Gulielmi, Robert Evenson, and Peter Sahlins. Others who kindly contributed are Adam

Ashforth, John Tehranian, Michael Kwass, Jesse Ribot, Ezra Suleiman, Jim Boyce, Jeff Burds, Fred Cooper, Ann Stoler, Atul Kohli, Orlando Figes, Anna Tsing, Vernon Ruttan, Henry Bernstein, Michael Watts, Allan Pred, Witoon Permpongsacharoen, Gene Ammarell, and David Feeny.

For the past five years the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale has been for me the site of a broad, interdisciplinary education in rural life and a major source of intellectual companionship. The program has given me more that I can imagine ever giving back. Virtually every page of this book can be traced to one or another of the wide-ranging encounters fostered by the program. I will forgo mentioning fifty or so postdoctoral fellows who have visited for a year, but all of them have contributed in large and small ways to this enterprise. We invited them to join us because we admired their work, and they have never disappointed us. The chief of the Program in Agrarian Studies, Marvel Kay Mansfield, has been the heart and soul of the success of Agrarian Studies and every other enterprise with which I have been associated at Yale. This is not the first occasion I have acknowledged my debt to her; it has only grown with time. Nor could Agrarian Studies have thrived as it has without the initiative of K. Sivaramakrishnan, Rick Rheingans, Donna Perry, Bruce McKim, Nina Bhatt, and Linda Lee.

My intellectual debts to colleagues at Yale defy accounting. Those with whom I have taught—Bill Kelly, Helen Siu, Bob Harms, Angelique Haugerud, Nancy Peluso, John Wargo, Cathy Cohen, and Lee Wandel—have, in practice, taught me. Other Yale colleagues whose fingerprints can be found on this manuscript include Ian Shapiro, John Merriman, Hal Conklin, Paul Landau, Enrique Meyer, Dimitri Gutas, Carol Rose, Ben Kiernan, Joe Errington, Charles Bryant, and Arvid Nelson, a visiting fellow who is completing a thesis on forestry in East Germany and who was an exceptional source of information on the history of scientific forestry in Germany. The graduate students in my seminar, “Anarchism,” and in a jointly taught seminar, “The Comparative Study of Agrarian Societies,” read several draft chapters of the manuscript, pulling them to pieces in ways that forced me to rethink more than a few issues.

I have been blessed with research assistants who turned what began as wild goose chases into serious quests. Without their imagination and work I would have learned little about the invention of permanent last names, the physical layout of new villages, and language planning. Here is my chance to thank Kate Stanton, Cassandra Moseley, Meredith Weiss, John Tehranian, and Allan Carlson for their superb work. I owe Cassandra Moseley not only thanks but an apology,

because all her fine work on the Tennessee Valley Authority resulted in a chapter that I reluctantly cut in order to keep the book within reasonable bounds. It will find another home, I trust.

Yale University Press has been good to me in more ways than one. I want to thank particularly John Ryden; Judy Metro; my editor, Charles Grench; and the best manuscript editor I have ever worked with, Brenda Kolb.

Several variants of chapter 1, each with some material from later chapters, have appeared elsewhere: "State Simplifications: Nature, Space, and People," Occasional Paper No. 1, Department of History, University of Saskatchewan, Canada, November 1994; "State Simplifications," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1995): 1–42; "State Simplifications: Nature, Space, and People," in Ian Shapiro and Russell Hardin, eds., *Political Order*, vol. 38 of *Nomos* (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 42–85; "Freedom *Contra* Freehold: State Simplification, Space, and People in Southeast Asia," in David Kelly and Anthony Reid, eds., *Freedom in Asia* (forthcoming); "State Simplifications: Some Applications to Southeast Asia," Sixth Annual W. F. Wertheim Lecture, Centre for Asian Studies, Amsterdam, June 1995; and "State Simplifications and Practical Knowledge," in Stephen Marglin and Stephen Gudeman, eds., *People's Economy, People's Ecology* (forthcoming).

I'd like to kick the habit of writing books, at least for a while. If there were a detox unit or an analog to the nicotine patch for serial offenders, I think I would sign up for treatment. My habit has already cost me more precious time than I care to admit. The problem with book writing and other addictions is that the resolve to quit is greatest during withdrawal, but as the painful symptoms recede, the craving is apt to return. Louise and our children, Mia, Aaron, and Noah, would, I know, be only too happy to have me committed until I was "clean." I'm trying. God knows I'm trying.

## **Seeing Like a State**

# Contents

---

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

**Part 1. State Projects of Legibility and Simplification 9**

Chapter 1. Nature and Space 11

Chapter 2. Cities, People, and Language 53

**Part 2. Transforming Visions 85**

Chapter 3. Authoritarian High Modernism 87

Chapter 4. The High-Modernist City: An Experiment and  
a Critique 103

Chapter 5. The Revolutionary Party: A Plan and a Diagnosis 147

**Part 3. The Social Engineering of Rural Settlement  
and Production 181**

Chapter 6. Soviet Collectivization, Capitalist Dreams 193

Chapter 7. Compulsory Villagization in Tanzania:  
Aesthetics and Miniaturization 223

Chapter 8. Taming Nature: An Agriculture of Legibility  
and Simplicity 262

**Part 4. The Missing Link 307**

Chapter 9. Thin Simplifications and Practical Knowledge: Mētis 309

Chapter 10. Conclusion 342

Notes 359

Sources for Illustrations 433

Index 435

# Introduction

---

This book grew out of an intellectual detour that became so gripping that I decided to abandon my original itinerary altogether. After I had made what appeared to be an ill-considered turn, the surprising new scenery and the sense that I was headed for a more satisfying destination persuaded me to change my plans. The new itinerary, I think, has a logic of its own. It might even have been a more elegant trip had I possessed the wit to conceive of it at the outset. What does seem clear to me is that the detour, although along roads that were bumpier and more circuitous than I had foreseen, has led to a more substantial place. It goes without saying that the reader might have found a more experienced guide, but the itinerary is so peculiarly off the beaten track that, if you're headed this way, you have to settle for whatever local tracker you can find.

A word about the road not taken. Originally, I set out to understand why the state has always seemed to be the enemy of "people who move around," to put it crudely. In the context of Southeast Asia, this promised to be a fruitful way of addressing the perennial tensions between mobile, slash-and-burn hill peoples on one hand and wet-rice, valley kingdoms on the other. The question, however, transcended regional geography. Nomads and pastoralists (such as Berbers and Bedouins), hunter-gatherers, Gypsies, vagrants, homeless people, itinerants, run-away slaves, and serfs have always been a thorn in the side of states. Efforts to permanently settle these mobile peoples (sedentarization) seemed to be a perennial state project—perennial, in part, because it so seldom succeeded.

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 premodern state was, in many crucial respects, partially 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. It lacked, for the most part, a measure, a metric, that would allow it to "translate" what it knew into a common standard necessary for a synoptic view. As a result, its interventions were often crude and self-defeating.

It is at this point that the detour began. How did the state gradually get a handle on its subjects and their environment? Suddenly, processes as disparate as the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishment 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 seemed comprehensible as attempts at legibility and simplification. In each case, officials took exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices, such as land tenure customs or naming customs, and created a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored.

The organization of the natural world was no exception. Agriculture is, after all, a radical reorganization and simplification of flora to suit man's goals. Whatever their other purposes, the designs of scientific forestry and agriculture and the layouts of plantations, collective farms, ujamaa villages, and strategic hamlets all seemed calculated to make the terrain, its products, and its workforce more legible—and hence manipulable—from above and from the center.

A homely analogy from beekeeping may be helpful here. In premodern times the gathering of honey was a difficult affair. Even if bees were housed in straw hives, harvesting the honey usually meant driving off the bees and often destroying the colony. The arrangement of brood chambers and honey cells followed complex patterns that varied from hive to hive—patterns that did not allow for neat extractions. The modern beehive, in contrast, is designed to solve the beekeeper's problem. With a device called a "queen excluder," it separates the brood chambers below from the honey supplies above, preventing the queen from laying eggs above a certain level. Furthermore, the wax cells are arranged neatly in vertical frames, nine or ten to a box, which enable the easy extraction of honey, wax, and propolis. Extraction is made



possible by observing “bee space”—the precise distance between the frames that the bees will leave open as passages rather than bridging the frames by building intervening honeycomb. From the beekeeper’s point of view, the modern hive is an orderly, “legible” hive allowing the beekeeper to inspect the condition of the colony and the queen, judge its honey production (by weight), enlarge or contract the size of the hive by standard units, move it to a new location, and, above all, extract just enough honey (in temperate climates) to ensure that the colony will overwinter successfully.

I do not wish to push the analogy further than it will go, but much of early modern European statecraft seemed similarly devoted to rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format. The social simplifications thus introduced not only permitted a more finely tuned system of taxation and conscription but also greatly enhanced state capacity. They made possible quite discriminating interventions of every kind, such as public-health measures, political surveillance, and relief for the poor.

These state simplifications, the basic givens of modern statecraft, were, I began to realize, rather like abridged maps. They did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted, nor were they intended to; they represented only that slice of it that interested the official observer. They were, moreover, not just maps. Rather, they were maps that, when allied with state power, would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade. Thus a state cadastral map created to designate taxable property-holders does not merely describe a system of land tenure; it creates such a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law. Much of the first chapter is intended to convey how thoroughly society and the environment have been refashioned by state maps of legibility.

This view of early modern statecraft is not particularly original. Suitably modified, however, it can provide a distinctive optic through which a number of huge development fiascoes in poorer Third World nations and Eastern Europe can be usefully viewed.

But “fiasco” is too lighthearted a word for the disasters I have in mind. The Great Leap Forward in China, collectivization in Russia, and compulsory villagization in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Ethiopia are among the great human tragedies of the twentieth century, in terms of both lives lost and lives irretrievably disrupted. At a less dramatic but far more common level, the history of Third World development is littered with the debris of huge agricultural schemes and new cities (think of Brasília or Chandigarh) that have failed their residents.