

James C. Scott. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998. 445 pages. Price not given.

The key question addressed in the book is: Why have so many large-scale schemes to improve the human condition failed so badly? And James Scott is the right person to have asked this question. Scott is the Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Anthropology at Yale University. He is also the author of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1977), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1987), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1992). All of the above have given him an excellent understanding of the nature of conflict in societies and the means of survival for the poor. Often the protagonists in the conflict have been people on one side and governments on the other. This is essential background for the book under review.

There have been many state-funded and state-sponsored projects in the twentieth century with the essential aim of improving the “human condition”. These include the very ambitious projects that came after the Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union, and especially the Stalinist collectivisation, the “great leap forward” in China, and the many programmes that have been in progress in most developing countries in the last five or six decades. The attempts at developing “modern industry and agriculture”, the creation and construction of new cities (mostly capitals and sometimes even cities from scratch), countless attempts at sedentarisation of pastoral peoples, and the imposition of modern taxation and legal systems are but some of the more prominent examples of these projects. In almost all cases, there have been failures and active or passive resistance from the “people” on whom these structures have been imposed. In almost all of the cases, the results of the imposition have been substantially different from what was intended, and the costs of the imposition have been substantial as well.

Most of these programmes have some things in common. They are all based on “modernist” visions, almost all of them are utopian, and most of them rely on “science and modern technology”. But here lies the problem too. This reliance creates simplicity in the programmes, it tries to reduce the complexity in society to legible order, and it tries to give schemes simple goals. All of the above are achieved by standardising things, and by imposing the same “logic” across areas and peoples. What was taken away from the people in most of these cases was not only the freedom to do things in the way they had been doing them but also, in many cases, the ability to apply local knowledge which was right and the correct response to the situation. Modernist visions of the society, technology, and ways of being have not been kind to local knowledge and ways of being, and in some cases the recipients are to that extent the poorer due to the loss.

Let us look at a few examples. The Stalinist collectivisation of agriculture was forced, and it was brutal in places. The idea was that if the peasantry could be arranged in collectives using modern technology, agricultural output would go up manifold, and there would be an investible surplus that could be used in the industrialisation effort. The policy-makers also believed that the condition of the rural peasant would also improve under these collectives. But of course they were wrong. In some areas, the technology the policy-makers were imposing was wrong; in others, the incentive structure they were imposing was at odds with what the peasants wanted; and overall the policy was certainly at odds with the wishes of the agriculturalists. The peasants resisted the changes. And the government insisted on making them. Given the power of the government, it is not surprising that the government succeeded, but at the cost of losing support of the peasantry, the loss of lives as well as the lower than possible surplus that could be extracted. The scheme was not sustainable. And after decades of passive resistance, the structure fell apart with the demise of the Soviet Union.

The argument is not against technology, modernity, or policy-making. The argument is against the simplification that the larger schemes have to assume, the disregard for local knowledge and people's wishes, the assumption of omniscience, the imposition by force, and the immunity to criticism that is built into the system. There have been schemes and technological changes, introduced by the states or adopted by the people themselves that have altered the living conditions of people radically. But in such cases the benefits of adopting the new ways have been clear to the people who have adopted the methods. And, therefore, there has been no active or passive resistance (foot-dragging or work-to-rule).

Increasing output is not the only reason for these modernist schemes. States usually have other motives too. The schemes have also been seen as ways of increasing government control over people and output, to make society more legible and to open it up for taxation, as well as documentation. And some of these schemes have also had very strong "modernist" aesthetics involved with them. So agricultural land has to be divided into rectangular plots, and houses have to be in straight lines, and polycropping is to be avoided. Of course, in some cases, the provision of services like sewerage, drinking-water, etc., does become easier with straighter lines, but as Scott convincingly shows, the logic of control and aesthetics is also a major reason for imposing this simplicity.

These aesthetic and control elements become even clearer in schemes of a different sort. A number of "modern" leaders of developing countries decided to construct "modern" capitals for themselves that would reflect the emergence of their new post-colonial people. Brasilia, Chandigarh, and Islamabad are examples. All of them have similarities. All of them were designed to be "modern". They have straight lines, rectangular grids, and broad main streets. They have areas designated for single specific activities: government offices, business areas, and residential

areas. All areas are separate. The main streets are broad and straight, facilitating both control as well as visibility. Whether it is the Constitution Avenue in Islamabad or the main square in Chandigarh or Brasilia, they all make the development of street society harder, and they all provide few places for hiding. All of them also have straight lines, and it is not only for ease of providing services. It is more to convey the message of a powerful, modern, and pervasive state.

Post-modernist thinkers from various fields have argued that these single-purpose blocks are actually inimical to the development of a “society”. Business areas and downtowns become desolate in the evening, and with fewer “eyes” on the street, that much harder to govern. Areas that have shops, offices, restaurants, and residences mixed up, make for better neighbourhoods. Greenwich village is an example from New York. In Pakistani society, one can contrast the differences between Lahore and Islamabad.

The book goes on to give a number of other examples, bringing out some of the points mentioned above in more detail. These include the village-settlement schemes in Africa, the managed forest schemes, the revolutionary-party schemes, and management of nature schemes. Each of the case studies is rich in detail and painstakingly researched.

The book should be essential reading for policy-makers, especially from developing countries. They have a penchant for ignoring the locals and their knowledge, and imposing structures that are very disruptive. It should be of interest to economists, political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists as it makes sense of a lot of what has happened around us in the last century.

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