

## Books in Review: James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State*

### Seeing Like Hayek

Russell Hardin

In his remarkable book, *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott defends a thesis that is kin to the central vision of Friedrich Hayek and the Austrian school of economics (256). The knowledge to run a society is widely distributed and very much of it cannot become available to a central government. Hence, a central government should not attempt to manage society in detail and it should not attempt massive redesign of society. Austrian economists generally worry about central control of the economy but they could as well worry, with Scott, about central control of social relations more generally. Scott especially deplores what Hayek called cartesianism and what Scott calls the high modernism of arrogant redesign of major parts of society, as in the effort to design cities in supposedly more rational ways (chap. 4), or to reorganize peasants into collective farms in Soviet Russia or into Ujamaa villages in Tanzania (chaps. 6 and 7). The general thesis of the Austrian Scott is compelling, as are many of his particular arguments from it.

Scott also argues that the state imposes many things on us in order the better to monitor and control us. Among these things are standards of measurement, national language, definitive and legally recorded property lines, surnames, and centralized traffic patterns, as in railway routes that connect the periphery to the center (chaps. 1 and 2). Some of these things are relatively recent in European society and even more recent in many other societies. Few of them were beneficial to those on whom they were first imposed. All of them enable the state to keep records on us or, in Scott's term, to make us legible. Our ready legibility allows the state to control us in various ways, such as to raise taxes and armies. In making us legible, the state typically simplifies the facts it reads from us. These facts are interested (that is, utilitarian), documentary, static, aggregate, and standardized (80).

Many state activities transform the population to make them fit such simplified facts, so that they can be observed and controlled (82). Scott supposes that the state's efforts to measure things through census and other devices commonly affect the things that are mea-

sured (22 and 82). Part of his argument is that this is deliberate policy, but sometimes he seems to imply that it just happens. Hence, the state creates the kind of industry and farming it needs for legibility, as in the apparently decided preference for plantation over small-

holder farming, even where the latter would be more productive (189–91). A second part of this thesis, that the state creates the kinds of people it needs for legibility, merits further argument and research.

There are at least two theoretical issues lurking here: legibility of the populace (which gives the book its title) and the value of local or distributed knowledge. The legibility of the populace is a sine qua non of very much public policy, whether

good or bad policy, as Scott notes (78). The value of local knowledge is brushed aside in high-modernist social design, as in Le Corbusier's urban designs, and in the totalitarian control of people for various purposes, such as remaking the Soviet economy and especially its agriculture. Le Corbusier's design of Brasilia is a slight misfit for Scott's claims because that city was built where there had been no local knowledge. The objection to the design is that it makes the city primarily a work of art rather than a place for comfortable and sociable living. It was virtually designed against the creation of local street-level knowledge through the isolation of people from the kind of street life that happens in naturally grown cities.

Liberalism essentially exalts local knowledge and values insofar as these are valued by individuals and, of course, it stands implacably against totalitarian control, which is often directed at redesigning not merely society and the economy but also the individual. When state capacity to make its populace legible is joined with high modernism in social design, totalitarian or immediately post-revolutionary government, and the absence of intermediary social structures, the state can take its population into disaster. The chain of argument is that "the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled

*Liberalism essentially exalts local knowledge and values insofar as these are valued by individuals.*

social terrain on which to build" (5, 89). One can add that this chain results in centralized designs that take little account of and even thwart local knowledge and that often fail largely for that reason.

Scott is not particularly interested in the benign side of legibility and most of his discussions are about state abuses of its knowledge of and controls over a legible populace. His perspective is usually that of the poor under the control of a state that is autocratic and that massively manipulates them, ostensibly for their own good or the good of future generations. But in actual fact, as he notes, the devices for legibility can also be used for good purposes, such as monitoring and preventing diseases (77). Indeed, if a state is to have any policies that benefit the populace, it most likely can achieve its purposes better if it has knowledge about the populace.

The devices that produce legibility enable the state to make readier, better-targeted interventions, whatever the state's purpose. The devices are neutral in the sense that they do not determine the direction of the interventions. A Nazi government can use the devices to track down those to be exterminated (78) and a welfare state can use them to distribute social security payments. For reasons of democracy and fairness, the US Constitution mandates a decennial census to allocate seats in the Congress according to population and to make tax collections equitable (the taxes were to be head taxes levied by the states and turned over to the federal government). Without the facts from such a cen-

sus, democracy must be less representative and the politics of redistricting or reallocating seats in legislative bodies must be far more capricious. Representative democracy and the census go together.

If one values democracy, political fairness, mass education, and egalitarian policies, then one must accept the need for making a populace substantially legible to the state (339-40). Otherwise the state cannot intervene to make sure those who are qualified can vote or to equalize opportunities and even welfares. All of these are part of the technological capacity to mobilize large populations, a capacity that developed over the past three centuries and that has produced representative democracy, revolution, and nationalism, all of which are essentially modern phenomena. Without the capacity for mass mobilization, the state could not control its "citizens" very well (and the very idea of citizenship itself is essentially modern).

As Scott (2) notes, before it had adequate measures of land holdings and other forms of wealth, the state was effectively blinded and it could not levy taxes without sometimes grim caprice that would bankrupt some while leaving others untouched. Egalitarianism can be achieved by reducing all to abject poverty in an anarchic subsis-

tence economy or it can be approached by elevating a state to manage at least some of the distribution of the benefits of a highly productive economy. Without access to education, the idea of equal opportunity is a farce, as suggested by the awful Supreme Court decision in *Wisconsin v. Yoder* that allows the Amish of Wisconsin to end their children's education at age 14 to protect them from the blandishments of the larger society.<sup>1</sup> That decision also "protects" those children against any opportunity to enter the larger economy.

Consider an example of benign state control that Scott inadvertently supplies. The cover photograph shows a farm area in North Dakota where a road has to zigzag at right angles to run along the borders of rectangular farms. Although the photograph is quite striking and might suggest the irrationality of such rural "design," it is

*Egalitarianism . . . can be approached by elevating a state to manage at least some of the distribution of the benefits of a highly productive economy.*

actually misfit for Scott's general thesis "against an imperial or hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how" (6). That thesis fits the cases of long-established Russian farms that were reorganized in the nineteenth century to make ownership more transparent to an outside observer so that the Czar's agents could levy taxes more easily and systematically. The regularity of the North Dakota and other farms in the American Midwest and West does not override any prior local knowledge or practice; there was no prior history of spontaneous creation of farm boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Those lands were carved into equal areas in order to be given or sold

very cheaply to new settlers. Moreover, the zigzags in roads were more-or-less necessitated by the fact that the surface is spherical, not flat, so that equal-size plots cannot be kept to a perfectly square grid. Should the state have carved these areas up differently? Scott (49-51) discusses these farms and the seeming control that the state got from having them be so regular, but one might think that the more compelling consideration was giving settlers equal opportunities to prosper through farming. Carving this land into virtual squares was simple but it was not high-modernist.

Indeed, as anyone flying over more arid parts of this land can see, the actual areas of growth are often circular, because the land is watered by long sprinkler arms that are tethered at the center of the fields and that are driven by water power in circles around the tethers. Although it is unlikely that this system was foreseen in the original design of virtually square plots, its efficiency is evidently so great as to justify letting corner areas lie fallow. Should the farmers use the land more fully? Or should we now conclude that uniformly square plots were by chance a good design in part just because they allow such extensive cultivation of the land in conjunction with this efficient watering system?

States control many people other than the poor and one might therefore think many people would want to block its efforts at control. For example, among recent politicians who have shared Scott's ambivalence toward state monitoring was Ronald Reagan, who put an end to data series that would be necessary for making policies in various areas. In particular, he ended the collection of divorce statistics in California and then the collection of various series of data on commercial activities at the national level. Knowledge of data in these and many other areas often politicizes them in the sense of provoking group politics to push for special treatment. A standing argument, for example, holds that accurate census data on ethnicity, religion, and language usage give potential political leaders the information they need to mobilize their groups behind demands to address their specific groups' concerns. Making not only the state but also such potential leaders ignorant therefore changes politics.

Many of the poor whose perspective Scott takes face massive economic transitions that supersede old ways of doing things and that relieve the next generations of the grim life of relative poverty. Local knowledge does, of course, get destroyed in such transitions, but much of what is lost is local knowledge that has no value once economic progress comes. Scott extols the rich local knowledge that an Andean potato farmer applies to small bits of poor mountain land to produce a substantial crop (301). In the face of poverty and necessity, as when most of the workforce are in agriculture, that knowledge is valuable. In a better economy in which agriculture is the work of a tiny fraction (under 2 percent in the US), however, that knowledge—and possibly those bits of land—would be worthless because the potatoes the knowledge produces cost far too much in human labor. It would be a good thing if prosperity saved the next generation from needing and having this bit of local Andean knowledge. Scott seems to agree with this general point in some contexts. For example, he notes that the knowledge how to start a fire with tinder and flint stones is well lost once matches become available (335), as is much of the knowledge of peoples in many places and historical eras who have faced great beneficial change. There may be sentimental losses even from wonderful innovations. For example, we might have had no *La Boheme* by Puccini if Mimi could have lit her candle with mere matches rather than by borrowing fire from Rodolfo.

In a largely misguided conclusion Scott presents a theory of ostensibly local knowledge. To see why it is misguided, recall Gilbert Ryle's distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how.<sup>3</sup> I know that Ryle was an English philosopher of mind; I know how to

ride a bicycle. The latter kind of knowledge is experiential. The former kind is typically not experiential for most of what ordinary people know. Our capacity for knowing-that may turn on our knowing-how, as, for example, it surely depends on mastery of language that is partly a matter of knowing-how in the strong sense that most of us could not begin to articulate our knowledge of language and how it works for us anymore than most of us could articulate how we manage to keep a bicycle underway without falling over.

Scott's term for knowing-how is the Greek *metis* (chap. 9). He wrongly assimilates this to the kind of local or distributed knowledge of his opening Austrian argument, to which Ryle's distinction is irrelevant. In fact, the dimension from knowledge-that to knowledge-how is largely orthogonal to the dimension from local (or distributed) to centralized knowledge. In an example of knowing-how, Scott notes that the captain of a ship yields the wheel to a harbor pilot to benefit from local knowledge when sailing into port (316-7). But the harbor pilot and the ship captain are both experts at knowledge-how to sail a ship and the harbor pilot adds to this a lot of local knowledge-that: for example, knowledge that there is an underwater sand bar to starboard. Such knowledge-that can be included in maps and communicated through buoys that mark off where one should sail. Eventually, even the knowl-

*... the dimension from knowledge-that to knowledge-how is largely orthogonal to the dimension from local (or distributed) to centralized knowledge.*

edge how to sail may be reduced to knowledge-that and the task might be assigned to computers, as much of it already is for piloting aircraft.<sup>4</sup> Scott says of knowing-how or *metis* that it is exceptionally difficult to teach except by doing (313), and yet one of his immediately preceding examples is the Native American knowledge of when to plant corn in New England: when oak leaves were the size of a squirrel's ear. This bit of wisdom can readily be taught and presumably was quickly learned by the English settlers (310). This rule of thumb was local knowledge-that, not *metis*.

A. N. Whitehead famously remarked that civilization advances by the reduction of more and more things to habit, which is knowledge-how. But it just as well advances by elevating much of knowledge-how to theoretical understanding, which is knowledge-that. Many things that might seem like local knowledge-how, such as knowledge of how to start a fire without a match, can even be self-taught. They require some knowledge-that plus a bit of trial and error that produces knowledge-how.

The genuine concern of Scott's criticisms of high modernist and radical social design (in chaps. 3-7) is the neglect of local knowledge—both *knowledge-how* and *knowledge-that*—and not simply the general category of knowledge-how. Indeed, the great centralizers Lenin and Stalin were so devastating to the lives of ordinary

Russians and others in large part because of their gifts for knowing how to play politics, for the metis of politics. Scott's concern with the disastrous effects of such centralizers is a Hayekist concern, not a concern with metis. He rightly criticizes the reliance almost entirely on centralized knowledge in, say, plans for Soviet collective farms and early American industrial farms (chap. 6), when such knowledge is inadequate to local circumstances, including the circumstances of the farm populations who must make such radical innovations succeed or fail (225).<sup>5</sup> Scott's focus on knowing-how (metis) leads him into asides on traditional medicine and agricultural practices that are not relevant to his larger concerns.

Note two ironic implications of seeing like Hayek. First, seeing this way means, in theory, seeing from the bottom up, from local circumstances, although Austrian economic theorizing is as much from top down as any high-modernist theorizing is. Hayek and the Austrians—including their recent acolyte Scott—have a very general theory about how knowledge works and where it resides. They may have come to this theory from particular instances that gave them a deeper understanding, as Scott has clearly learned from his extensive field research in very particular cultures and locales. But they then go on to apply this theory to many new circumstances and even to the issues of national economic and social policy. Hayek's most widely read book, *The Road to Serfdom*,<sup>6</sup> was written as a general criticism of the effort to centralize the management of a socialist economy. His critique followed directly from his theory of distributed knowledge and hence of the importance of entrepreneurial creativity. He did not need to know anything in particular about the Soviet economy to write that book.

Second, the Hayek vision says that there are very many things, even whole classes of things, that the state cannot know. Therefore, any defense or expectations of the state must be built on what it can know, which is more or less the simplified facts that Scott notes. Hence, policies must be fairly general. But note that, somewhat metaphorically speaking, institutions, and therefore states, can know many things that individuals cannot know. For example, big institutions can amass aggregate data on a population and on their activities (as Scott notes for the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta [77]). In the end, it is the institution that knows these things, although some of them might be put in an annual report or other document where, in summary form, the facts could be digested by individuals. For the most part, however, few individuals will come to know these data despite their importance in policy design and imple-

mentation. Even those who do come to "know" them will at most take the data on faith.

Finally, note that any Austrian economist supposes that we know some fairly general things about people, such as what motivations or kinds of motivations they are likely to have. It is partly their sense of the basically economic motivation of people who are involved in economic enterprises that led them to deplore Sovietization of the economy and of agriculture. If we switch from individual farms to collective farms, we de facto make the production of the farm a collective provision, the rewards from which must then be allocated among the collective farmers. This makes my contribution to the general product virtually irrelevant to me so that I must now be motivated not by what I gain from my efforts but by what we all collectively gain from our collective effort. To my knowledge, the Austrians did not fully articulate the logic of collective action that runs against the hope of managing and even increasing production by making it collective. Yet if one wishes to say that local knowledge was the crucial problem with collective farms, one must explain why after nearly three generations the requisite local knowledge had still not arisen to run those farms collectively. What had happened, of course, was the rise of local knowledge to subvert the collective effort by capitalizing on standard individualistic economic incentives. The failure of collectivization was therefore a failure of incentives, not a failure to rely on local knowledge.

*Russell Hardin is a professor of politics at New York University*

## Endnotes

1. *Wisconsin v. Yoder et al.*, 406 U. S., pp. 205–249.
2. It does override the former freedom of Native Americans to roam widely over these regions.
3. Gilbert Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That," in Ryle, *Collected Papers*, vol. 2: *Collected Essays* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971; essay first published 1946), pp. 212–225.
4. Scott perversely cites Aristotle as a source for the view that navigation and medicine are inherently matters of knowing-how (322). Fortunately, there has been some progress in both these areas since Aristotle's time. Indeed, it is not even clear that doctors in his time knew either how or that when it mattered.
5. Industrial farming in North America has long since become economical and highly productive.
6. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944.