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## The Aestheticising Vice

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*Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* by  
[James C. Scott](#)

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In the Languedoc there is a vineyard that teaches us an important lesson about textbook learning and its application to the world. In the early Seventies it was bought by a wealthy couple, who consulted professors Emile Peynaud and Henri Enjalbert, the world's leading academic oenologist and oenological geologist respectively. Between them these men convinced the couple that their new vineyard had a theoretically ideal microclimate for wine-making. When planted with theoretically ideal vines whose fruits would be processed in the optimal way according to the up-to-date science of oenology, this vineyard had the potential to produce wine to match the great first growths of Bordeaux. The received wisdom that great wine was the product of an inscrutable (and untransferable) tradition was quite mistaken, the professors said: it could be done with hard work and a fanatical attention to detail. The couple, who had no experience of wine-making but much faith in professorial expertise, took a deep breath and went ahead.

If life were reliably like novels, their experiment would have been a disaster. In fact Aimé and Véronique Guibert have met with a success so unsullied that it would make a stupefying novel (it has already been the subject of a comatogenic work of non-fiction). The first vintage they declared (in 1978) was described by Gault Millau as 'Château Lafite du Languedoc'; others have been praised to the heights by the likes of Hugh Johnson and Robert Parker. The wine is now on the list at the Tour d'Argent and the 1986 vintage retails at the vineyard for £65 a bottle. The sole shadow on the lives of these millionaires is cast by the odd hailstorm.

No one to whom I have begun recounting the story believes it will end well. Most people are extremely unwilling to grant that faith in textbook knowledge should ever be crowned with success. We have a very strong narrative bias against such stories. It is a bias we forget once our children fall sick or we have to travel in an aeroplane, but so long as we are in storytelling mode we simply deny that systematic textbook reasoning can make headway against whimsy and serendipity. Apart from anything else, it is deeply unfair that it should.

In *Seeing like a State*, James Scott is definitely in storytelling mode, though he seems unaware of the narrative biases that result. (It makes me curious to know what he's like when he travels by air, which as an anthropologist he must do quite often.) He has two kinds of story to tell in this book, one of them interesting and one of them, well, not; but to compound the confusion he tells them as though they were one. The first kind of story is the more faithful to his subtitle, since it tells us that the reason *certain* schemes to improve the human condition have failed (my emphasis) has been a fixation with aesthetic (and specifically visual) simplicity. It is a compelling account.

A metaphor for this failure is the growth of the science of forestry in 18th-century Germany. Scientific forestry began as an attempt to map the forests so that their owners could know what lay in them. It was an enterprise inspired partly by the ideals of Linnaeus, mostly by the urge for profit, but it soon turned into a different kind of undertaking altogether. The forests that were first mapped were complex, visually anarchic eco-systems. They were great forests, but they didn't make great maps. They were also messy to exploit commercially. The lesson was learned, and over time more and more forests were uprooted and replanted, in neat linear patterns so as to make them easier to map (and to fell). In the process they lost some of the qualities that had made them great forests – resistance to certain diseases, for example. But in the process they also made more money for the state, at least in the short term. Ecological problems began to appear later on, though Scott is infuriatingly (and characteristically) coy as to whether these problems meant that Germany would have been better off without scientific forestry at all.

Modern statecraft since the 18th century has involved a great deal of effort to make society 'legible', in Scott's illuminating term. This effort has ranged from the standardisation of weights and measures, to cadastral surveys, to the establishment of surnames (a relatively modern convention), to some much nastier impositions of social control. Scott's thesis is that the activities at the nasty end of this spectrum are a natural extension of the activities at the harmless end, and for a particular reason: the managers of statecraft have believed that what looked neat, attractive, comprehensible, must also be successful in larger human terms. Scott diagnoses this particular aestheticising vice at the heart of the ideology of Modernism, and observes that it becomes particularly dangerous when put at the service of an over-strong state facing a weak civil society. He runs through a series of case studies to prove his point. The development of the Modernist city (Brasilia or Chandigarh, for instance), Lenin's conception of party discipline, Soviet collectivisation, the herding of rural people into official villages in Tanzania and Ethiopia, the growth of modern scientific agriculture. Along the way there are also many intriguing and diverting observations about all kinds of societies from pre-colonial Indonesia to 15th-century Bruges.

The best of the case studies document the aestheticising vice in telling ways. Scott notes how Le Corbusier's city plans were often consciously presented to make a powerful visual impact when seen from a great distance (from the sea 'after a two week crossing', or from the air). What Modernist city planners disliked about existing cities was that they looked messy,

regardless of how they worked. Indeed, Jane Jacobs famously argued many years ago that the most human and interesting neighbourhoods to live in tended to look messy precisely because of the way they functioned – with a great deal of local initiative and decentralised happenstance. Corbusier and other Modernists hated all this, and tried to design it out, with consequences Scott is not the first to bemoan.

More repressive projects, too, had their aesthetic imperatives. Forced village resettlement under Mengistu in Ethiopia was vicious about the visuals:

the local recruits learned their jobs well, for the villages and their 1000 [square] metre compounds, carefully marked by pegs and sod cuts, have followed the geometric grid pattern required by the guidelines. In fact, some villages have been too rigidly laid out: for example, one farmer had to move his large, well constructed *tukul* [traditional thatched house] some twenty feet so that it could be 'in line' with all the other buildings in its row.

Why did form matter so much? It is hard not to hear the echoes of Palladio, who argued for straight roads on the grounds that 'the ways will be more convenient if they are made everywhere equal: that is to say that there will be no part in them where armies may not easily march.'

Scott's collection of case studies forms a rich and learned compendium of Modernist hubris, but he wants to create more than a commonplace book: the studies are meant to illustrate a general case. After all, the particular case has been documented by others: his work on cities owes much to Jane Jacobs, the story of scientific forestry to Henry Lowood, and so on. But it is in making the general case that Scott comes unstuck, for the studies do not illustrate a common theme. Some of them do indeed illustrate the damage done by Modernist aesthetics, but not all of them, and in any case Scott does not want to stop there.

His second, more ambitious story is that *all* systematic plans for human improvement based on simplification and generalisation are bound to fail. 'Fail' could mean one of two things here. It is either a truism, meaning that all such ambitions will deliver less than their most enthusiastic partisans have hoped, because life's like that. Or it could mean something stronger, namely that all plans dependent on simplification and generalisation will end in tragedy, and would have better not been undertaken. Scott doesn't quite assert this directly, but proceeds by hints and casual association. The casual association begins with the simple list of case studies (it proceeds from Soviet collectivisation to modern scientific agriculture without any awareness of bathos). Lest one think the list purely pragmatic, he is at pains to assert that its elements have something in common: 'the great High-Modernist episodes that we have examined qualify as tragedies in at least two respects,' is how he begins the concluding chapter, signalling clearly that he intends us to think of all of these episodes as sharing the same central flaws.

That scientific agriculture has faced unforeseen problems is undeniable, as is the fact that

some of these problems (the environmental ones, for instance) are serious. But the achievements of scientific agriculture to be set against them are remarkable. The proportion of the world's population in grinding poverty is almost certainly lower than it has ever been, though in absolute numbers it is still unacceptably high. Where there have been important areas of systematic failure, such as in sub-Saharan Africa, these owe more to social and institutional disasters that have hurt all farmers alike than to the science of agriculture itself. To equate the problems of scientific agriculture with those of Soviet collectivisation is like saying Stalin and Delia Smith have both had problems with egg dishes. Scott is aware that it is absurd to talk of scientific agriculture having 'failed' in the same way as Soviet collectivisation 'failed'. Once in a while he adds a careful rider, to acknowledge the achievements of some of the movements he castigates. But then, the rider over, he goes back to lamenting their failures as though these were all on a par.

Here are two examples of the rhetoric at work. First, the book's concluding chapter is a hymn to *metis*, the Greek for uncodifiable, practical knowledge. That this kind of knowledge is valuable no sane person would dispute, but Scott wants to convince us not only that modern science is committed to erasing *metis*, but that the loss will be enough to outweigh any likely gain. So the chapter contains a number of examples of 'prescientific' medicinal discoveries (like variolation), whose rhetorical purpose appears to be to convince the reader that modern scientific medicine is not so very superior to the traditional stuff. Well, okay, the examples are fine as far as they go, but prescientific medicine also prescribed bleeding with leeches, and traditional folk wisdom in many poor countries to this day has it that dirty and rusting sickles can be used to cut umbilical cords after rural births. Fifteen-all, you may think, but anyone who thinks that this shows an approximate equality between traditional and modern medicine ignores some very basic facts. For instance, that infant mortality has fallen dramatically in the modern era, almost entirely as a result of the displacement of so-called folk wisdom by modern techniques of hygiene and public health. (Today even very poor countries have low infant mortality by historical standards: by contrast, Italy on the eve of the Second World War had levels of infant mortality as high as those of Uganda today). Modern medicine can learn a lot from traditional ideas, in the right circumstances, and the arrogance of modern medicine has undoubtedly stifled some kinds of folk wisdom whose disappearance we should regret. But these sentiments are not enough to base a book on.

Perhaps Scott, as a professional anthropologist, feels the need to speak up for traditional knowledge systems as counter-currents to the tidal wave of accountants and bankers shaping the rest of modern culture. Or perhaps he simply thinks it makes a better story, for the same reasons that most of us think the triumphs of Aimé and Véronique Guibert in the Languedoc make a boring one. In which case this book has distorted an argument for the sake of aesthetics, exactly the same vice of which (with reason) he accuses Modernist planners. Perhaps both are true, and Scott, in a ritual worthy of an anthropological monograph, is following a convention that is one of the most highly evolved survival mechanisms of his professional tribe.

A second example. Early in the book Scott worries that some may think him a conservative,

since he has it in for the Modernist state, and conservatives are now triumphant about the discrediting of that vision of the state. So he hastens to assure us that he has it in for the market, too: 'A market necessarily reduces quality to quantity via the price mechanism and promotes standardisation; in markets, money talks, not people. Today, global capitalism is perhaps the most powerful force for homogenisation, whereas the state may in some instances be the defender of local difference and variety.' Here Scott substitutes sound-bites for observation. Of course global capitalism has made the goods available in one country more like the goods available in another country. But this seems deplorable only to that privileged minority who spend more time in aeroplanes than buses, and who regret the fact that the exotic goods they used to bring back from their travels are now available at their local corner shop. For the rest of the population who do not travel frequently there is no question that global capitalism has vastly increased the variety of goods and services available to them. Ask anyone who has experienced a planned economy: they would have been lucky to find even a single type of tasteless apple available in their local shop.

A defence of *metis* (and Scott is right that it needs defending) must be mounted with great care, since otherwise it looks like an attack on education itself, which does more than anything else to help people discard those aspects of their local traditions that do them harm. Scott would be horrified to be associated with the school of conservatives who oppose education on the grounds that it gives power to the great unwashed, but they at least have the virtue of brutal honesty. What doesn't horrify him, but ought to, is his keeping the company of the 'something-precious-is-lost-to-modern-life-once-mothers-no-longer-circumcise-their-daughters-and-you-can-buy-rambutan-in-Sainsbury's' school. There is no feebler pretext for conservatism than the anxiety that progress is somehow inimical to charm.

Understanding the merits, the vices and the limits of systematic knowledge is no less valuable now that organised Marxism has collapsed. There are enough big unsolved problems to provoke the most morose conservative to transports of lugubrious joy: what to do about testosterone, for example. Or the insane things people do for fear of death. Or the fact that arms manufacturers, following an impeccable text book logic, sell their products to people who use them rather than to people who don't. And if we turn from the insoluble problems to the merely extremely difficult (such as how to build a free and prosperous society on the ruins of a centrally-planned dictatorship), what we need is some way to use the strengths of systematic knowledge – incorporating evidence, learning from others – rather than a generalised lament about the impossibility of the task. Equivocations on the ambiguity of 'failure' are the last things we need. Totalitarian Marxism failed, in the sense that the 20th century would have been better off without it, but, of course, not all it brought was bad (the countries of the former Soviet empire have inherited standards of health, literacy and scientific education that are the envy of developing market countries). These countries' dash to the market has seen failures, but it has not failed in the same overall sense. Many mistakes have been made, and much of value has been drowned in a tide of vulgarity. For a few years the Russians, Poles and Romanians who come to the West will consist more than proportionately of spivs and sex-workers (though there is no truth in the rumour that Belarus

is to change its name to Belles 'Я' Us). But at the moment the voices calling on us to respect *metis* in these countries are not those of the defenders of autonomy, pluralism and local tradition. They are the voices of those who would urge their fellow citizens to resist learning anything from the world outside. Paradoxically, the Modernist ideology that dominated their lives for so many decades was one that sought to protect them from outside knowledge, too. This is only one of the many ironies which suggest that Scott's portrait of the failures of systematic knowledge is too simplified to be of much help.

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