

After Seeing Like a State: The Imperialism of Epistemic Claims

Ayça Çubukçu

Allow me to begin with two conclusions. First, my sense that James C. Scott is not “anarchist” enough in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), although precisely that may be a good thing to his mind; second, that Scott’s desire for a “true” science bears the stamp of the high modernist outlook he criticises.

In this remarkable work that has become a classic, Scott examines “why so many well-intended schemes to improve the human condition have gone so tragically awry.”¹ He labours in ten chapters to demonstrate “the logic behind the failure of some of the great utopian social engineering schemes of the twentieth century.”² In the course of this demonstration, Scott argues against the “social engineering” dreams of high-modernism, left and right. Whether he is thereby against *any* utopian vision to improve the human condition—that is less clear.

What is evident is that in *Seeing Like a State*, Scott draws a distinction between liberal and authoritarian states, opposes the latter, and refuses to indict the state as such. “The state, as I make abundantly clear, is the vexed institution that is the ground of both our freedoms and our unfreedoms,” he writes.³ “My case is that *certain* kinds of states, driven by utopian plans and an authoritarian disregard for the values, desires, and objections of their subjects, are indeed a mortal threat to human well-being. Short of that draconian but all too common situation, we are left to weigh judiciously the benefits of certain state interventions against their costs.”⁴ To the degree that they oppose “the state” as such, be it liberal or authoritarian, many an anarchist may find this statement difficult to endorse, and sensibly so: it is what Scott composes “to plead innocent” to the charge that his argument is “an anarchist case against the state itself.”⁵

Notable too in this statement is what it leaves unclear. Are utopian plans dangerous in themselves, or do they become harmful when combined with an authoritarian disregard for the values, desires, and objections of a populace? In any event, Scott insists that he is not making “a blanket case against either bureaucratic planning or high-modernist ideology,” but “a case against the *imperialism* of high-modernist, planned social order.”⁶ His is “a case against an imperial or hegemonic planning mentality that excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how.”⁷ Here, the vocabulary of imperialism anticipates the case Scott later makes against “imperial knowledge,”⁸ which he also designates as “rationalist” and “epistemic” knowledge. He argues that the universalist claims, measures, and standards of

¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis added, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

“imperial knowledge,” its uniformities, homogenizations, abstractions, generalizations, its need to quantify, its attempt to create the appearance of order through the aesthetics of geometry—they all end up in “tragedy,” understood in terms of lives lost or irretrievably disrupted.

A question then arises: what knowledge is not imperial, which knowledge anti-imperial in kind? Scott’s answer is the particular, the local, the context-bound, the practical knowledge of *metis*, “the knowledge that can come only from practical experience.”⁹ Yet, to the extent that he too expounds an anthropology that has “the” human condition as its object of analysis, and “human well-being” in the singular as its goal, Scott may be read as producing “imperial knowledge” in *Seeing Like a State*. There is Scott’s unmistakable—if not utopian—commitment to a truly “scientific” science, including the social sciences, that undermines, I fear, his powerful critique of the “imperialism of epistemic claims,”¹⁰ which denies, as he protests, the wisdom and worth of unique, diverse, local, particular, practical knowledge.

James Scott is a master at his craft, a maestro. He plays well the undecidable: whether he is merely describing, prescribing, or condemning, it is often difficult to tell. He reconstructs in fine detail, case after case—from urban planning to scientific forestry, from Soviet collectivization to industrial agriculture, from Lenin’s revolutionary vanguardism to Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania—how high-modernist efforts to improve the human condition have failed to offer, in theory and in practice, an adequate “recipe for a satisfactory human community.”¹¹

A *satisfactory* human community, Scott says, would be diverse, cooperative, knowledgeable, innovative, complex, improvisational, autonomous, unique. It is as if he intimates that an unplanned, informal, and indeed, satisfactory social order *in reality* (would he not call it “human nature”?) already bears these qualities above, below, or prior to the inventive interventions of the state. Such state interventions include efforts to render “society” legible for the purposes of taxation, conscription, control and other acts of statecraft through which the state exercises its “ability to give its categories the force of law.”¹² Yet, these categorical abstractions and standardizations are not to be condemned blanketly, Scott insists, as they enable, for one, “equality before the law” among other aspects of “our freedoms.”

Scott laments the “universalist pretensions of epistemic knowledge and authoritarian social engineering,”¹³ *not* the ends of equality, freedom, emancipation, or public welfare they may have effectively served in the past or can serve in the future. Scott’s short-of-anarchistic *ambivalence* towards the state, which provides “the ground both of our freedoms and our unfreedoms,” can be missed only at the risk of doing injustice to his argument. Nonetheless, one is still left to wonder what exactly Scott means by “our freedoms” in the context of wage slavery and private property, the unvarying ground of *capitalist* social relations.

This question is particularly relevant if Scott is indeed indebted more to writers such as Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Proudhon¹⁴—partisans of anarchist freedoms—than to neoliberal figures who haunt *Seeing Like a State* from the introduction to the conclusion. “Put

⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 341.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 309.

¹² Ibid, p. 3.

¹³ Ibid, p. 340.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

bluntly, my bill of particulars against a certain kind of state is by no means a case for politically unfettered market coordination as urged by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman,” Scott writes preventively.¹⁵ Still, if at the end of the twentieth century, Scott can claim that “global capitalism is perhaps the most powerful force of homogenization, whereas the state may in some instances be the defender of local difference and variety,”¹⁶ it is not obvious how we shall interpret this statement some twenty-five years later, when it is the Trumps, the Erdogans, the Modis, the Johnsons who venture to protect “local difference and variety” along with global corporations that *do* find such diversity profitable. More precisely then, what is the relation between state and capital in *Seeing Like a State*? Does “local difference” necessarily, ontologically one might say, work against state or capital, both or neither?

“The troubling features of high modernism derive, for the most part, from its claim to speak about the improvement of the human condition with the authority of scientific knowledge and its tendency to disallow other competing sources of judgment,”¹⁷ finds Scott in a moment of clarity. Later, in his discussion of villagization in Tanzania under the high modernist, developmentalist paradigm of Nyerere, he poses and responds to a critical question: “If the plans for villagization were so rational and scientific, why did they bring about such general ruin? The answer, I believe, is that such plans were not scientific or rational in any meaningful sense of those terms.”¹⁸ A suspicion arises then about a set of tensions in Scott’s argument. On the one hand, Scott wants to critique “the authority of scientific knowledge” when it is mobilized to disallow other sources of judgment. On the other, he wants to use, appeal to, and mobilize the authority of *his* scientific knowledge, which bears the (white man’s?) burden of proving itself *truly* scientific, accurate, right.

For Scott, the kernel of the problem is not the mobilization of the authority of scientific knowledge—it is the *incorrect application* of science and its authority. The fault is not with science then but with mistaken, inaccurate, incorrect science. In Scott’s book, “true” science perceives the world from a “strictly dispassionate view,”¹⁹ as “if the proverbial man from Mars were to stumble upon the facts.”²⁰ The antithesis of this secular man from Mars (presumably Scott’s ideal scientist) repeatedly appears in *Seeing Like a State* as a person of religious “faith” who is said to be “impervious to criticism or disconfirming evidence”²¹ in the face of “stubborn social realities and material facts.”²² Is not such a juxtaposition distinctly modern, in fact, “high modern” of Scott?

Because he “recognizes the power and utility of scientific work,”²³ Scott wants to *preserve* the benefits of science, but without its imperial hubris, which insists that its solutions to the problems of social order and welfare are the only legitimate ones. I fear, however, that Scott’s very desire for a true science bears the stamp of the high modernist outlook he

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 93.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 253.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 285.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 253.

²¹ Ibid, p. 253.

²² Ibid, p. 257.

²³ Ibid, p. 290.

criticises. After all, as Scott himself observes, high modernism is “politically polymorphous; it could appear in any political disguise, even an anarchist one.”²⁴

“The utopian, immanent, and continually frustrated goal of the modern state,” Scott finds, “is to reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality to something more closely resembling the administrative grid of its observations.”²⁵ If science, including the social sciences, assists the state in creating the administrative grid of its observations, it is important as well to highlight Scott’s insight that “the builders of the modern nation-state do not merely describe, observe and map; they strive to shape a people and landscape that will fit their techniques of observation.”²⁶ This is partly how “modern statecraft is largely a project of internal colonization, often glossed, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a ‘civilizing mission,’”²⁷ a mission which includes, I must add, the aim of cultivating new subjects—a new proletarian, a new citizen, a new human—and of redeeming them in and through “a satisfactory human community.”

It is critical to reflect here on what Scott calls “a satisfactory human community” and the kind of humanity it assumes and produces, descriptively and prescriptively, at once. Take Scott’s admiring discussion of Jane Jacob’s scholarship in urban planning as example. “Thanks in part to Jacobs,” writes Scott, “we now know more about what constitutes a satisfactory neighbourhood for the people who live in it.”²⁸ *Seeing Like a State* is an anthropology of humanity, one that, in this instance, perturbs to demonstrate city dwellers’ *universal desire* to live in neighbourhoods marked by “openness, plasticity, diversity.”²⁹ Openness, plasticity, and diversity are at once the qualities that incidentally—shall we say, scientifically—characterize unplanned, spontaneously developing, “thick cities” according to Scott, which fare better than “thin cities.” But isn’t such a claim about what constitutes the fundamental qualities of *any* satisfactory city a paradigmatic example of the imperialism of epistemic claims, which disavows other interpretations and experiences of human sociality in urban settings?

I am making a simple point. James Scott’s argument in *Seeing Like a State*—meant to be valid for any “satisfactory human community” across time and space—is itself a product of high modernism and “the imperialism of epistemic claims,”³⁰ not unlike the utopian state projects he critiques. The primary difference between the two is that Scott does not appear to endorse the implementation of his findings at gunpoint—except, perhaps, when he refrains from critiquing “the state itself” and its *violent* means which transcend the liberal-authoritarian divide.

In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott’s primary problem is, in Partha Chatterjee’s formulation, “to preserve the achievements of modern society—freedom, science, higher average levels of prosperity despite all the inequalities—without the support of a big state.”³¹ But what is this society—anarchist, social democratic, liberal? Scott can’t quite clarify his position. That raises a final question: if, given its contingency, “it is impossible to legislate for the future” as Kropotkin once declared, is this insight not valid for “the present” as well, which was, after

²⁴ Ibid, p. 164.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 82.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 82.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 82.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 145.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 143.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 340.

³¹ Partha Chatterjee, personal communication, August 2020.

all, once “the future”? *Is it possible, or desirable, to legislate for the present?* James C. Scott appears to think so—hence my sense that he is not “anarchist” enough in *Seeing Like a State*, although exactly that is a good thing to his mind.

Author Biography:

Ayça Çubukçu is the Co-Director of LSE Human Rights and Associate Professor in Human Rights at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of *For the Love of Humanity: the World Tribunal on Iraq* (2018), and of numerous articles in critical and postcolonial theory. Çubukçu co-edits the *Humanity Journal*, the LSE International Studies Series at Cambridge University Press, and *Jadaliyya*'s Turkey page.