Review Essays
The State in the Field:
Official Knowledge and Truant Practices

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One of the more hopeless targets of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian zeal was the “nominal confusion” that prevailed in eighteenth-century England. “It is to be regretted,” he wrote in his Principles of Penal Law, “that the proper names of individuals are upon so irregular a footing. Those distinctions, invented in the infancy of society to provide for the wants of a hamlet, only imperfectly accomplish their object in a great nation.” His remedy was to propose “a new nomenclature... so arranged, that, in a whole nation, every individual should have a proper name, which should belong to him alone.” Bentham recognized that it would be more trouble than it was worth to try to impose such a rationalized system of uniquely proper names on England. Still, he recommended it to new states, offered them a standardized three-part nominal system (in which he incorporated an anticipation of the ID number), and even speculated on the advantages of adopting the “common custom among English sailors, of printing their family and christian names upon their wrists, in well-formed and indelible characters.” In other words, Bentham wanted us to tattoo our names on our bodies as the ultimate identity card, ensuring that we would never leave home without it.

If no great nations or new states have in fact adopted such a scrupulous system, it may not be for want of motive or effort, and indeed some have come pretty close, as James C. Scott explains in his deeply absorbing and imaginative new book, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. For some two hundred years after the revolution, for example, the French state limited its citizens’ choices of officially recognized names and made it extraordinarily difficult for people to change their names once registered. Similar systems have prevailed in many German states since the nineteenth century. In Sachsen-Weimar, for example, the tidy official mind took a first step in the Benthamite direction in 1876 by declaring that no one could be registered with the same name as anyone else in the district—a rule that might well impugn local family naming

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practices. But rules that offend against such deep cultural sensibilities tend to be evaded, even if they cannot always be openly flouted. In the French village studied by Françoise Zonabend in the 1970s, the plastic regime of “real” names long remained impervious to the imposed regularities of the civil system based on the immutable truths of alphabet and filing cabinet. In the phlegmatic words of one father, “For my children, I give them one forename at the mairie, and some other ones at the church.” Even baptismal names were not sacrosanct, since people could be known by different first names at different times of their lives. So a wife might give her husband a new name at marriage, or a man take a new name upon inheriting the family farm. This local regime of names may have been baffling to the state, but it made sense to the villagers. Its intricacies served their own culture of relationships, identification, and meaning, and until very recently the state’s system was simply laid alongside it rather than superseding it altogether.

This clash of nomenclatures is but one example of the contradiction that is the subject of Scott’s book. On the one hand, there is the modern state’s project of rendering society “legible” through enforced programs of registration, standardization, and simplification; on the other, the resistant “practical skills” and concrete knowledges nurtured in the practices of everyday life. For this kind of knowledge, Scott uses the Greek term metis, a word situated in the same field of meaning as Michel de Certeau’s concept of tactical “making do” or bricolage, or for that matter the quotidian struggles surveyed by Scott in his own earlier work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. The present study is in part the history of the state’s covert expropriations of these weapons of the weak. Since the eighteenth century, the state has labored, through means varying from the land survey to the census to the rationalization of languages and city planning, to “appropriate, control, and manipulate” the cultural diversity of its inhabitants: “to make ... society legible [by] rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format”—convenient, that is, for the state’s own purposes. Historically, these were “the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and the prevention of rebellion,” which were soon extended to the maximization of the state’s resources, initially for the purposes of war. Thus the state began to cover society with a grid of description that enabled its expanding projects of planning and control.

Scott’s presiding metaphor for these modern projects of legibility and rationalization is the image of the map. The map is a two-dimensional abstraction, prepared by experts, that renders a complex landscape of features and people into a form usable for specific purposes. In Scott’s metaphor, the mapmaker is the state, and the landscape is civil society. The mapping of the world in this sense made enormous

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strides in the nineteenth century, but the potential of its power/knowledge nexus remained limited both “by the state’s modest ambitions and its limited capacity.”8 But in our own time, Scott argues, some states have been able and willing, under certain circumstances, to deploy this grid of power in the service of unprecedentedly ambitious and coercive projects of natural and human development, utopian both in their scale and their optimism. (The planning and conduct of war slip into the background as Scott’s vision is drawn to these more well-intentioned and improving projects, although one might argue that modern wars have had perversely improving effects on belligerent populations, not to mention the expansive economic effects of certain projects to deter war.)

The animating impulse here is what Scott calls the ideology of authoritarian “high modernism”: specific neither to the right nor the left, this is defined essentially as “envisioning a sweeping, rational engineering of all aspects of social life in order to improve the human condition.”9 High-modernist improvement schemes have characteristically been launched by postrevolutionary and postcolonial states that can plausibly legitimate their vast projects of refoundation and development. Thus Scott’s case studies put the familiar example of Stalinist Russia into the company of Julius Nyerere’s “villagization” of Tanzanian agriculture, and include smaller-scale projects like the modernist city-planning endeavors of Brasilia and Chandigarh. For Scott, these attempts at rational planning have all been spectacular failures. Their horrifying cost in human lives and happiness is made all the more poignant by the fact that the projects he chooses to discuss were motivated not by tyrannical malevolence but by good intentions. The question he poses is, why have such noble aspirations gone so disastrously awry?

Politically, as Scott points out, the attempts to enact these projects have rested on the coexistence of an authoritarian state and a prostrated civil society, and he faults the high-modernist improvers (perhaps too gently) for their neglect of “democracy [and] civil rights.”10 However, for Scott, these familiar themes of political and historical analysis are the contingent conditions of possibility rather than his own explanatory focus. He pays little attention to their dynamics (thus neatly sidestepping reviled debates about the character of totalitarianism), and remains content with an unexamined and essentially static state/society polarity. The core of his own analysis is the story I have just summarized: the state’s historical drive to render society intelligible, its attempts to systematically order and rationalize its citizens and their social relations, to render them transparent and permeable to the state’s purposes. To adapt Karl Marx’s comment on capitalist accumulation, the watchword and downfall of the modern state in this analysis is, “Enumerate, enumerate! That is Moses and the prophets!”11 Just as accumulation drives the capitalist both upward but also headlong toward disaster, so enumeration and its attendant manipulations carry not only the promise of mastery but the threat of a kind of willed ignorance. Projects of classifying and standardizing require that you simplify and abstract, that you ignore all the details and peculiarities and, above all, the local

8 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 88.
9 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 88.
10 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 89.
knowledges that cannot be rendered visible on the big scale required by this level of social cartography. This is the historical motor of the grand improvers, yet equally it is the obstacle over which they ultimately stumble. For the knowledge produced by the state, the knowledge on which it launches its vast reformatory projects, is, Scott argues, thin and treacherous, its power and reach purchased at the price of a catastrophic loss of the situated wisdom in which real life flourishes.

A fundamental cause of difficulty here is the fact that mapping is not simply a descriptive practice but a transformative one. The modern state, argues Scott, “attempts . . . to create a terrain and a population with precisely those standardized characteristics that will be easiest to monitor, count, assess, and manage . . . to shape a people and a landscape that will fit their techniques of observation [to create] closed systems that offer no surprises and that can best be observed and controlled.”12 In so doing, it rides roughshod over whatever does not fit its universalizing standards of observation; it cannot take into account the concrete, the local, the hybrid. I am reminded (reading Scott’s generous compendium of data and references has the pleasing effect of sending you diving into your own bag of idiosyncratic memories) of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ praise of:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)13

“Who knows how?” It’s that combination—not just the loss of the fickle and freckled but also the claim to a kind of pansophic mastery—that Scott deplores and that he sees as the secret of the improvers’ failures. Pursuing the agricultural thread that is one of the themes of the book, he traces this fatal combination from the eighteenth-century Prussian state forester’s concept of the Normalbaum—the standardized tree, managed solely as a maximum unit of usable timber in a forest of identical units—to the failed projects of mass agricultural development that litter our own era. He tracks the concomitant destruction of the local habitats, knowledges, and cultivation practices that used to dapple the landscape before the planners set to work. The state’s commitment to uniformity means that it either stamps out or is blind to what Luce Giard has called “the truant freedom of practices”14—life not as a legible system or structure but as loose articulation and muddled site of unpredictable everyday creativity.

Scott’s high-modernist ideologue is very like Karl Popper’s “utopian engineer,” who “aims at remodelling the ‘whole of society’ in accordance with a definite plan or blueprint [and] at controlling the historical forces that mould the future of the developing society either by arresting this development, or else by foreseeing its course and adjusting to it.”15 The utopian engineer, rejecting the kind of caution in planning that Scott, too, recommends, ends up by repeatedly having “to do things which he did not intend to do”—he is forced into improvization, or what Popper

12 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 81–82, my emphasis.
calls “the notorious phenomenon of unplanned planning.” Meanwhile, his counterpart the “piecemeal engineer knows, like Socrates, how little he knows” and ends up getting more done at less human cost. Popper’s piecemeal engineer, in other words, obeys the injunctions Scott finally addresses to the planners: take small steps; expect surprises; plan for reversibility; engage human inventiveness.

My reference to Popper is not intended to criticize Scott for revisiting old ground. Scott himself acknowledges that his assault on utopian modernism is hardly novel as such, and it does no disservice to his achievement to say that it is grounded in a now familiar postmodern critique of totalizing rationality. But to this he has added his own ingenious angle of vision, a suggestive juxtaposition of the political projects of planned progress on the one hand and of intelligibility on the other. It is fascinating to track precisely this shift of perspective, the changing terrain of metaphor that animates these inevitably repeated debates about the best way to meet human needs. Scott’s “high-modernist ideologue” is shadowed by a lineage that includes the utilitarian, the Fabian socialist, the totalitarian bureaucrat, the rational subject. A generation ago, writers like Popper or Sidney Pollard fell naturally into the language of “social engineering” to describe the planner’s projects, and the arguments raged around the extent to which the tasks of human history, so to speak, could be left to the market. Now, Scott redirects the subject onto the ground of ecology and taxonomy, and he attacks high modernism for its fixity in every sense: the high-modernist ideologue is the enemy not just of pluralism but of everything that is mobile, nomadic, local, provisional, and hybrid.

In some ways, I think this book is two texts coexisting in a single volume. One is a familiar critique of monopolistic, closed political systems, but it is pitched in terms of epistemological and ecological pluralism rather than political pluralism. Thus metis is figured here as a kind of epistemological snail-darter or spotted owl, endangered by the incursion of more powerful monocultural knowledge-species into its local social habitats; and Scott’s salvationist hopes are pinned on our ability to cultivate and sustain epistemological diversity—civil society’s mixed forest contrasted with the state’s sterile ranks of Normalbäume. This imaginative attention to diversity is beautifully drawn, and Scott’s great originality is that he entwines this account with a second text that engages the directly political and less often posed question of how the minutiae of official knowledge are compiled and used by the state. This question dominates in the early chapters, but some of the issues it throws up about the relationship between state and civil society are not as fully developed as one might hope. The state is presented as the actor, civil society as its object, and that’s pretty much that. Yet if one looked beyond the kinds of states Scott anatomizes, one might find examples of enterprises that complicate this one-way vision. A historian of twentieth-century Western Europe, for example, might look at post-1945 planning for economic and political reconstruction as attempts to “improve the human condition” by moderating the anarchy of capitalism, but without substituting the state for the market or civil society. Two other major projects of state/society collaboration rather than subsumption—public health and

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16 Popper, Poverty of Historicism, 69.
17 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 345.
universal education—are also strikingly absent here, and so, too, the emancipation of women with which they are closely entangled. These campaigns entail a kind of emancipatory mobilization alongside the production of transparency, and shadow the statistics of official progress with innumerable stories of individual lives achieved and enriched through such programs, not despite them.

In this sense, the book seems to me to offer two parallel rather than fully integrated texts. I end by offering two modest examples of how one might develop the relationship between epistemic and metic knowledge to open up Scott’s rather closed state/society construct, though with contrasting implications. On the one hand, there is a familiar dynamic in systems of classification that produces anomalies, which then have to be somehow annulled in a hopeless attempt to preserve the integrity of the system. It is surely this, and not just the original ambition of the high-modernist ideologue, that helps to account for the dynamism and ruthlessness of certain utopian schemes. Even well-intentioned classifications are exclusionary in this sense, and it is odd not to see this fundamental problem addressed more directly here. On the other hand, might there not be a more optimistic dialectic in the large-scale mappings that are so suspect to Scott, but that might, so to speak, convert “epistemic knowledge” back into metic? The electoral register is a reductive kind of mapping; yet as I was reading Scott, I watched a friend who was running for election to the local school board using the register to pinpoint not just the names and party registrations but also the recent voting records of his potential electorate; this allowed him to concentrate his limited campaigning energies on that small percentage of his neighbors who might both cast a vote and cast it for him. In this homely, local example, one can see a “thin” system being put to an eminently local and thickly layered use.

Scott is not unaware of this dialectic, of course, and he is careful to direct his severest criticisms at authoritarian rather than democratic exploitations of legibility. Indeed, his book concludes with a touching example of the entanglements of epistemic and metic knowledge, although I confess I cannot quite work out whether this is a conscious move on the author’s part. Contrasting Maya Lin’s Vietnam War Memorial with the figurative memorial to Iwo Jima, Scott points out that, despite depicting naturalistic human forms, the Iwo Jima sculpture has become a closed icon that forces spectators into a position of receptive passivity: they stand, they look, they walk away. By contrast, Lin’s wall of names “virtually requires participation in order to complete its meaning”: it incites people to touch and trace the names of those they lost.19 No doubt there is a specific aesthetic and historical background to this,20 but it also discloses the universal surname as more than merely a document of official identity, the inscription as more than a military register. Meaning—and this is really the heart of the matter—manages to insinuate its “truant freedom” into even the most orderly of systems.

19 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 355.