

# See Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed

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17/08/2022

## About the Book

- ▶ The Author: James C. Scott, an American political scientist and anthropologist specializing in comparative politics
- ▶ How central governments attempt to force legibility on their subjects, and fail to see complex, valuable forms of local order and knowledge.
- ▶ **State Projects of Legibility and Simplification**
  - ▶ **Nature and Space**
  - ▶ Cities, People, and Language
- ▶ Transforming Visions
- ▶ The Social Engineering of Rural Settlement and Production
  - ▶ Soviet Collectivization...
  - ▶ how schematic, authoritarian solutions to production and social order inevitably fail when they exclude the fund of valuable knowledge embodied in local practices.
- ▶ The Missing Link
  - ▶ Thin Simplifications and Practical Knowledge: Metis

# Story 1: Scientific Forestry

- ▶ Before: a growing shortage of wood
- ▶ The purpose of the government: deliver the greatest possible constant volume of wood.
- ▶ The methods:
  1. Standardize techniques for calculating the sustainable yield of commercial timber.
    - ▶ Color-coded nails(Johann Gottlieb Beckmann)
    - ▶ The cone-volume principle
  2. Attempt to create a forest that was easier for state foresters to count, manipulate, measure, and assess.
- ▶ After:
  1. High productivity in the first generation, more uniform stands and more usable wood fiber.
  2. Retrogression in the second generation
  3. Forest death: monoculture



Figure 1: Mixed temperate forest, part managed, part natural regeneration



Figure 2: One aisle of a managed poplar forest in Tuscany

## Story 2: The Standardization of Weights and Measures

- ▶ Before: failure in taxation, political control, and conscription
- ▶ The purpose of the government: increase fiscal receipts, enhance military manpower and state security.
- ▶ The method: forage the tool of legibility: state measures
- ▶ Loss of local measurement:
  1. Tied to practical needs.
  2. Reflected particular cropping patterns and agricultural technology.
  3. Varied with climate and ecology.
  4. An attribute of power and an instrument of asserting class privilege.

# Four elements Lead to the Tragedy

▶ Four elements:

1. The administrative ordering of nature and society.
2. A high-modernist ideology.
3. an authoritarian state that is willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring these high-modernist designs into being.
4. A prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans.

⇒ Ignore essential features of any real functioning social order.

## Critics of the quantification

"the dangers of dismembering an exceptionally complex and poorly understood set of relations and processes in order to isolate a single element of instrumental value."

- ▶ e.g. COVID-19
- ▶ Omitted Variable Bias
- ▶ Lucas Critique (Lucas): reduced-form equations should not be used for policy analysis, as the reduced-form parameters depend on the policy.
- ▶ Book reviews:
  - ▶ ...For one, Scott's evidence is selective and eclectic, with only minimal attempts to weigh disconfirming evidence. – David D. Laitin
  - ▶ The failure of collectivization was therefore a failure of incentives, not a failure to rely on local knowledge. – Russell Hardin