

Seen Like a State

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Every Fall, I teach a large lecture course required for City College political science majors called Introduction to World Politics, a course whose vague title and broad catalog description allow me to teach more or less what I want, as long as students learn something about the world and its politics. Taking advantage of that fact, I teach the first half as a broad history of state formation around the globe: what states are, where their origins can be found, how they work, and why people have historically avoided them. Although I didn't start out with this intention, as the unit has developed over the years, it has basically become a lesson in James Scott-ism. We start with some material about ancient states from *Against the Grain*,¹ take a tour through Southeast Asia's Zomia region with a chapter from *The Art of Not Being Governed*,² and by the end find ourselves staring at photographs of Brasilia while discussing the logic of high modernism described so well in *Seeing Like a State*.³

The point of this last lesson is for students to consider how the aesthetics of order can feed a fetish for state authority and for students to realize that many of them, unknowingly, may be fetishists themselves. The lesson is a culmination of a theme that runs throughout the semester: that students of politics need to understand how states see, how states are seen, and how students of the state often see through eyes trained on the order states provide while overlooking the disordering violence through which state authority is built and maintained. Particularly when the lessons turn to violence being a primary means through which states create order, some students are uncomfortable. This discomfort is exactly the point. I want

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1. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

2. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

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

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them to come away from the course with a view of state power as contradictory, to apprehend the state as a “vexed institution that is the ground of both our freedoms and our unfreedoms,” as Scott aptly describes it.⁴ Seeing the foundation of the state as contradictory, though, requires students to see their (frequently unrecognized) commonsense—that the coercive force of a “strong” state is an appropriate means through which to protect citizens—as partially true at best and deceptive at worst.

I see this practice of seeing anew as consistent with the ethos of Scott’s work. Having read most of Scott’s books over the years, I have come to understand his oeuvre as trying to show us how to see the world from a different angle, with the metaphor of sight being most fully developed in *Seeing Like a State*. To that end, in this review, I would like to consider how Scott has helped us see states anew and what other facets of state authority still remain to be seen clearly even in the wake of his foundational work. I make three points.

First, following Scott’s lead in *Seeing Like a State*, political scientists have increasingly paid much attention to how states see—how states make populations “legible,” to use Scott’s famous descriptor. But states are also *seen* by their populations and we would do well to consider how populations view their states.⁵ Key to understanding how states are seen is beginning with the assumption that how states are seen is often a function of *who* is seeing them. Unlike states which, in Scott’s rendering, pursue a synoptic vision of their populations, an individual’s view of a state is often particular. That is, one’s perspective is likely shaped by the position one holds in the local social and political order.

Scott gets at this perspectival point in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, which followed *Seeing Like a State*, where he shows that hill-dwellers in Southeast Asia view the valley states from which they have fled with a wary eye.⁶ While valley-residents typically see their upland neighbors as “uncivilized barbarians,” when seen from the hills, the “civilized” valley states can themselves appear barbaric, as such states rest upon militarized violence and coerced labor. So, Scott tells us, when seen from the outside, the order states provide can seem downright disorderly.

It is not only when states are viewed from the outside, though, that their foundational violence can appear disorderly; states can appear as sources of violent

4. *Ibid.*, 7.

5. See, for example, Lisa Wedeen, “Seeing like a Citizen, Acting like a State: Exemplary Events in Unified Yemen,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 4 (2003): 680–713.

6. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

disorder to their own citizens. In my book on crime, policing, and vigilantism in democratic South Africa, I discuss some of my ethnographic work among young men involved in various illegal activities and how they see the state.⁷ For these men, encounters with police officers often produce terror, particularly in the wake of the South African Police Service's informal adoption of a dubiously legal "shoot-to-kill" policy. As I argue in the book, in the wake of this policy, from their point of view, the state appeared as something akin to a large-scale vigilante group, as they feared the possibility of extra-judicial police violence. Put differently, from the vantage of these men in South Africa's race, class, and age systems, the state manifests as a source of potentially deadly disorder—much like those who fled Southeast Asia's valley states for the refuge of Zomia's hills, except these men have few options for escape.

Importantly, unlike the external view of Scott's Southeast Asian hill societies, here the view is from within the state's borders. And when the view of a state is from within, it shifts the kind of vision one has of the state, from a distant vision of the state to an intimate one—my second point.⁸ In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott persuasively shows us how modern states see the world schematically and from above. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, he shows us that hill-dwellers see valley states from a remove, having fled for the mountains over generations. Where states and outsiders see from a distance, though, citizens often see their states from close-range. The difference in perspective is like the difference between taking in the totality of a painting from across a room versus admiring the technique of individual brush strokes from an arm's reach. The equivalent to seeing brush strokes when a citizen views the state is to see the individual officials with whom one interacts, rather than the abstraction of the state form. Put differently, in *Seeing Like a State*, Scott gives us a synoptic view of the state to help us see the forest of state logics for the trees of daily state practice. But, in daily practice, people rarely encounter *the* state. Rather, they encounter its agents—its bureaucrats, its border officials, its police officers.

7. Nicholas Rush Smith, *Contradictions of Democracy: Vigilantism and Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

8. The view is an intimate one, at least, for those citizens most likely to come into contact with the state's agents on a daily basis like citizens who are most reliant on state services or citizens who are most likely to be policed. Although space precludes a full discussion here, for wealthy citizens in many parts of the world, the state might be experienced either as a background presence to their lives or as an inconvenience to be bypassed in favor of services from the private market. This reality is consistent with my first point that *who* one is shapes *how* one sees the state. I thank Jonathan Blake for pushing me on this point.

My work with men involved in crime may serve again as a useful example. As I noted above, these men worried about encounters with police in general, understanding that any encounter could produce violence given South Africa's deeply rooted history of violence against young black men. However, they were often also concerned about specific officers. During my fieldwork, stories frequently circulated about certain units or particular officers that young men needed to avoid. These units or those officers, swirling rumors suggested, were particularly violent and likely to kill suspects they encountered (often extrajudicially, it was said). So, these young men had a dual vision of the state. At a broad level, they understood policing as structured by the country's racial logics and as shaped by political leaders' demands for violence against suspects. But, they also had an intimate view of the state's individual agents because, in practice, it was individual officers who conducted investigations, who tortured suspects, or who fired shots during encounters.⁹

To see states through their individual agents shifts the kinds of questions we might ask about how they function. In Scott's rendering, states are relatively coherent actors. However, because individual citizens often see individual agents of the state, we would do well to not only ask how states see, but how state officials see—my final point.¹⁰ Specifically, we might ask if state officials see with the same eyes as a state. In *Seeing Like a State*, the vision of individual officials is largely absent. To be sure, we encounter individuals, although they are typically state leaders, like Lenin and Nyerere, or the planners who inspired their visions, like Le Corbusier or Baron Haussmann. The frontline officials carrying out the state's daily work to execute the planners' visions, however, are largely absent in this view of the state.

Their absence, though, makes one wonder how these synoptic designs are executed in practice and what role individual agents might play in carrying out (or subverting) the state's plans. Individual officials often have their own moral codes that are hard rooted in their agencies and resistant to the demands of senior state planners.¹¹ Indeed, ironically bearing a similarity to the tactics described in Scott's classic

9. In some instances, as part of their survival strategies, these young men also formed relationships with specific officers as informants or even as friends upon whom they could call to solve problems.

10. See also Giorgio Blundo, "Seeing Like a State Agent: The Ethnography of Reform in Senegal's Forestry Services," in *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, ed. Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 69–89.

11. For example, Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

work on peasant resistance,¹² reform efforts often lead to everyday forms of *official* resistance—foot-dragging, working to a rule, or outright refusal.

Such resistance is particularly consequential when it comes to agencies that wield violence. In South Africa, early post-apartheid reformers saw a police force in need of radical transformation so it would become a service to its citizens instead of a threat against them, as under apartheid. Among other reforms, this involved a cultural transformation so that police would see protecting human rights as a primary duty. Individual officers and specific police units were resistant to these changes, however, and the resistance was surprisingly widespread across racial lines.¹³ To put it in Scott's terms, individual officers saw state regulation as something to avoid or short-circuit, even though they were ostensibly the state's agents.

In the case of South African police reform, the practices of human rights policing that reformers sought to instill rubbed against the grain of a long-standing police culture in which officers saw citizens as enemies that needed to be contained. Even as it was particularly hard-baked into the South African police because of the apartheid state's counterinsurgency campaigns, this commonsense among police is an organizational culture that ethnographic work on the police shows is common across democracies.¹⁴ And, as in South Africa, despite periodic bouts of reformism, it is a culture that has been largely resistant to change, as decades of police violence against African Americans in the United States suggests. The means of resisting reforms are myriad. Unlike the focus of Scott's work, some forms of resistance are formal and organizational, as attention to the recalcitrance of American police unions to reform in the wake of the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and the 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis has shown.¹⁵ Other resistance, though, is informal, as when officers exercise discretion in how they carry out their work to subvert reform efforts designed to make them less violent.¹⁶

12. Especially, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

13. See especially, Julia Hornberger, *Policing and Human Rights: The Meaning of Violence and Justice in the Everyday Policing of Johannesburg* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

14. For example, William A. Westley, *Violence and the Police: A Sociological Study of Law, Custom and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970); and Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).

15. James Surowiecki, "Why Are Police Unions Blocking Reform?" *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2016, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/19/why-are-police-unions-blocking-reform>; and Noam Scheiber, Farah Stockman, and J. David Goodman, "How Police Unions Became Such Powerful Opponents to Reform Efforts," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/us/police-unions-minneapolis-kroll.html>.

16. Michael K. Brown, *Working the Street: Police Discretion and the Dilemmas of Reform* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988).

Ironically, much like the forms of peasant resistance that Scott describes in early work, here agents of the state see the state itself as something to avoid or sabotage.¹⁷

Perhaps most troublingly of all, though, political leaders may either tacitly accept¹⁸ or positively support¹⁹ police violence, stymying reform from above. The consequences of this resistance from above and below are severe, even deadly. While such resistance may have a family resemblance to the kinds of informal resistance strategies Scott describes in his various works, there is at least one crucial difference: policing agencies are legally authorized to use violence.²⁰ And, as much ethnographic work on these institutions shows, when states use violence against their citizens, it often exceeds that which is allowed by law, making states themselves informal and procedureless through the violence of their agents.²¹ So, instead of *Seeing Like a State's* depiction of states as relatively coherent, if coercive and misguided, apparatuses, attention to the actions of individual officials reveals states that are informal and internally contradictory, with violence against their own citizens being one potential result.

To return to a theme from the beginning, what then is the nature of our fetish for state authority? Depending on the perspective from which one sees the state, depending upon how intimately one knows the state's agents, and depending upon how violent the agents one encounters are, this fetish may appear less like a fetish for order than for its opposite. In his extraordinary oeuvre, Scott gives us a vision of states from a historical and an outside perspective. Our goal now should be to see states as they are today and from the view of those most likely to encounter its violence. Doing so, would attune us to the fact that our fetish for order and authority is a fetish for violence—and often violence against fellow citizens that exceeds the bounds of laws meant to constrain it. We need to see this violence, to bear witness to it, and therefore to become uncomfortable with it. Seeing this violence, though,

17. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

18. Graham Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

19. David Bruce, *Marikana and the Doctrine of Maximum Force* (Johannesburg: Parktown Publishers, 2012).

20. A second crucial difference, as protestors highlight with their demands to “defund the police” in the wake of George Floyd’s killing by Minneapolis police, is that citizens actively invest in this violence through the state’s taxing and budgeting powers. I thank James Rodriguez for highlighting this point.

21. Beatrice Jauregui, *Provisional Authority: Police, Order, and Security in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Didier Fassin, “The Police Are the Punishment,” *Public Culture* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 539–61; and Laurence Ralph, *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

reveals a tragedy: We are stuck with this “vexed institution,” as Scott rightly calls the state, with no real alternative to it.

Which returns me to the classroom. How do we teach our students to confront this vexed institution? Here, the vital importance of political vision manifests. Scott’s work shows us the importance of forcing ourselves to see politics from different vantages and to challenge our commonsense about how the world operates. Doing so holds out the promise of seeing solutions to political problems which may not be immediately apparent to eyes trained by received wisdoms. When it comes to the questions of state violence I have considered here, one such vision is represented in calls to abolish policing and prisons and to imagine a world in which security is provided outside of the logic of state violence. For many, to see through such eyes is difficult. But, here, I have at least some hope. This hope rests with my students, whose youth means their eyes are capable of seeing much further than most people, including me. In the spirit of Scott’s work, the goal of my teaching, then, is to make my students aware of the lenses through which they have been trained to see the world, so that they can discard them and perhaps see a path to a better, less violent world than the one we have given them.

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