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# Looking at the State: An American Perspective

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*Review Essays*  
Looking at the State: An American Perspective

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MORTON KELLER

JAMES C. SCOTT'S *Seeing Like a State* is in essence a post-Cold War book. That is to say, it is not caught up in the which-side-are-you-on, Free World versus Communist World, capitalism versus socialism divisions that for so long colored social science scholarship. His thesis is simple, significant, substantial. He holds that, from earliest historical times—though for his purposes, the eighteenth century is a sufficient starting place—those in authority have tried to organize society through centralized, from-the-top-down plans, and that, with the leaden consistency of dum-dum bullets, their plans have failed. What lies behind these schemes, and why their record of achievement has been so dismal, is the theme of Scott's book. His interest in the subject grew out of his work on rural life in Southeast Asia, an area rich in failed settlement and rural improvement projects. While *Seeing Like a State* discusses non-arboreal topics such as urban planning and industrial Taylorism, its primary concern is with centralized agricultural and village planning, and how and why it so inexorably goes awry.<sup>1</sup>

Scott takes note of a dizzying variety of devices that over the course of time have been enlisted to serve top-down control. These include the creation of permanent last names (in the late medieval West), standardized units of weight and measurement, cadastral surveys and population registers, freehold tenure, public health, political surveillance, poor relief, taxation, the standardization of language and law, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation. What do these "state simplifications" have in common? They seek, above all, to make people's activities and relationships more uniform and more "legible," and thus more readily controlled from the center. Scott deals with these devices in familiar contexts: social control, state autonomy, a managed economy. With more originality, he also explores their cultural meaning. Top-down planning, he argues, has its own aesthetic. Central planners seek "legibility": that is, the capacity to "read" the units that they seek to organize and control. Hence the regularized names, numbers, maps, lists, language, law, and other "state simplifications."<sup>2</sup>

There is a philosophy as well as a structure and a language to state planning. Scott calls it "high modernism," a faith (often disguised as a science) in the aesthetic and social superiority of well-ordered forests, farms, and cities. Nature and society alike

<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 3.

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