



BEYOND THE HIGH MODERNIST MOMENT

– AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES C. SCOTT

■ NIELS BRIMNES & CASPER ANDERSEN

Anyone reading ‘Seeing Like a State’ will notice that you are critical of states. Having been here in Denmark for an extended period of time how do you come to terms with the fact that it seems we have a state here which is quite omnipresent, well liked and generally trusted?

It is obviously true that the Danes and the Scandinavians love their states, because they seem to have domesticated them relatively successfully, and they are probably the best functioning welfare states in the world. I was reading a Francis Fukuyama book and there was a little section in it called ‘Getting to Denmark’ as the aspiration of many countries.¹ It is not as if I have not noticed how successful the Danish welfare state is, but the important thing is, and I do not have to remind you as historians of course, how recent a thing this is historically. I am, of course, writing mostly about third world states or socialist block states and it seems to me that the era of welfare socialism that is successful is not only confined to a small part of the world but is radically recent in terms of being effective in the last three or four decades. One is always apt to forget that your successful state is created by struggle.

The other thing that I would emphasize is that we all in the developed West have to understand the foundations of our relative prosperity in the world. Someone once asked George Orwell why the English working class had not made a revolution and he said something like: “Oh, that’s simple, our proletariat is in India.” And the fact is that the proletariat of the West is toiling in factories in China, Mozambique and Bangladesh. So it seems to me that with the international division of labor and with the circulation of capital that at the push of a button can go from one place to another, one has to realize that the ugly things which are the foundation of our prosperity take place by and large out of our sight.

You say that the successful or benevolent welfare state is a very recent thing and that is of course true, but the states and processes that you criticize in your book

¹ Fukuyama: *The Origins of Political Order*, 14-19.

are within the same time frame. So when you write about state driven disasters in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, it is exactly when the building of the Danish welfare state begins.

In a sense you could say that the people behind the Russian revolution, Lenin in particular, actually did believe that politics would disappear as a struggle over values because there would be a technical solution to almost any social problem. You can see this if you read *State and Revolution*.² Lenin drew this understanding from German wartime experience in the First World War of central planning, when Germany held out much longer than expected. So it seems to me that you had the same basic aspirations in the Russian system as in Scandinavia, but in Russia you had a kind of autocracy that were able to remove any obstacle, protest, and social mobilization from below that would resist the flat application of these plans. So when I say that the Danes have domesticated their Leviathan, it seems to me that credit should go to the kind of social mobilization and democratic forces that prevents states from doing as they please.

In a little book called *Two Cheers for Anarchism* I make it clear that I think it is a hopeless and wrong utopian project to eliminate the state. The question is: can we domesticate the state and not let it escape our democratic power? I am quite pessimistic about that. We consider things like the French Revolution and the idea that all Frenchmen were subject to exactly the same law as opposed to the medieval feudalist state of guilds, clergy, peasants, and so on to be emancipatory. We all celebrate the achievement of citizenship and the emancipation of the French Revolution. At the same time it is also clear that it eliminated a whole series of intermediate structures between the state and the citizen, and created the basis for a kind of direct mass-mobilization and total warfare which very soon Napoleon made use of in his invasion of Russia. The point I want to make is the ambivalence of these emancipatory projects: they have a side that we celebrate and a side that gives us pause, because it created possibilities for the kinds of warfare and mobilization, which we saw in operation in much of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This is a question of the trade-off between security and freedom, and I think that the state is almost always going to choose security over freedom. It seems to me that we face a constant struggle as citizens to prevent the encroachment on our liberties by a state that may have the best intentions in the world of protecting us.

If you were to write a new version of 'Seeking Like a State', could you imagine including a case where the state has a positive role to play in the planning process in order to paint a more diverse picture of how states can see and what states can do?

² Lenin: *Staten og Revolutionen*.

Vaccination is interesting, because when people are looking for 'the good state', vaccination comes up again and again. I understand that vaccination only works, if you vaccinate a certain proportion of the vulnerable population and that you have to vaccinate people quickly to break the cycle of infection. And assuming the vaccination is right, that it is called for by the scientific facts, I would be happy to use an army to enforce people to be vaccinated because it would save so many lives.

I of course have a history of working on peasants and the Third World and I think it is fair to say that in most Third World countries the elites has been too far separated from their peasant population. Nyerere³ is a good example. He was a completely honest uncorrupt, upright school teacher. Yet he was deeply embarrassed by his own population's backwardness and wanted to drag them into the twentieth century. If it took force, he was willing to use it. From his point of view these people's opinion did not count because they were so backward. He did not understand or respect why the people were moving from place to place and why they were organized as they were, because he never inspected or enquired as to the rationality of their subsistence practices, planting practices, nomadic pastoralism and so on. As a result he made a complete mess of their lives.

Do I think that the state has become more beneficent in the last forty years? With the exception of the fact that it is more than half a century since our last great war, with the exception of warfare – and you could argue that this is an effect of atomic power because it is so catastrophic – I do not think the state has become more beneficent, no. But I am happy to admit for local exceptions, Denmark would be one of them.

It seems difficult, however, to distinguish between vaccination, where you can use force because it serves a good purpose, and agricultural reform, where you should not use force?

I have actually thought of this in relation to agricultural reform. What we call Agricultural Extension Services are specialists who try to improve agricultural practices. If I were the Tanzanian minister in charge of agricultural improvement, I would do two things. First of all I would not send extension agents with a plan to encourage or even force people to adopt new practices. No, the first thing I would do is that I would send the extension agents to the rural communities to ask the question: "What problems do you need solved? Let us try to work on your agenda of how we might improve your life. Tell us the problems you would like to

3 Julius Nyerere (1922-99). Den første leder af det uafhængige Tanzania (fra 1961-64 Tanganyika). Nyerere var inspireret af socialismen og styrede Tanzania som en et-partistat. Blandt hans politiske initiativer var genbosætningen af landbefolkningen i planlagte Ujamaa-landsbyer. Nyerere trak sig tilbage i 1985.

have solved and we will then put our scientific apparatus and brains together in order to solve *your* problems.” This is rather like my favorite example of an anarchist movement, Solidarity in Poland, in which the intellectuals like Adam Michnik came to the Solidarity strikers and said: “How can we help you? What do you need to know about the constitution? What do you need to know about the legal system? You tell us what we can do for you.” So the first thing I would do is to have the agenda of agricultural improvement come from the grassroots, from a real contact with the villagers.

The second thing I would do, which is done already to a certain extent, is to have demonstration farms. That is to say not force people to do anything, but to show them the results of certain planning practices, certain seeds, certain cultivation techniques, and do this in their village or nearby and then leave it to them whether they want to adopt these practices. There is a kind of theory about this developed by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler in a book called *Nudge*⁴ – meaning an effort to create incentives that move people towards better practices.

In the Malay village in which I was doing research, I lived with a quite crusty, sixty-year-old man who in many respects was a reactionary, but he was a very good rice farmer. Near the state capital about forty miles away there were a series of experimental plots. I had a little car so we went there. He made us stop again and again because he noticed some rice that looked particular good to him. We must have stopped five or six times, and each time he went over a fence at age sixty to cut little particles of seeds of this rice, which he liked. Then he planted them to see how they turned out. Later on I happened to ask someone in the state’s Agricultural Ministry about this and he said: “We were trying out all these different types of rice and we planned to introduce them in two or three years time, but by the time we got around to introducing them, it turned out that everybody knew about them because they were passing the seeds back and forth.”

So it seems to me that the role of the state in the case of agricultural improvement is to start with an agenda of what people would like, what *their* idea of an improvement of life would be, and then to give them a series of options that they are free to take up and free not to take up as they wish. There is a sense in which things that are compulsory are resisted just because they are compulsory. I really do believe in the role of the state as a demonstrator of a whole series of options, without assuming that it knows the way a good life ought to be lived.

One more example of a terrible idea. In Holland after the Second World War they built a tremendous amount of urban housing for people coming in from the countryside. They knew that these people lived in the kitchen and they thought this was uncivilized. So when they built these flats for the workers, they made the kitchen so small that you could not put a table in it or sit down in it, in order to

4 Sunstein & Thaler: *Nudge – Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*.

force people into the sitting-room, which they thought was a proper middle-class way to live. So by an architectural design they were taking away a cultural practice and obliterating it because it was seen as uncivilized and backward. That is the kind of stupid urban planning that I find objectionable.

The muscular, authoritarian, high modernist state is not very common in history, but you find a lot of states with high modernist aspirations and a high modernist rhetoric. Does it change your analytical framework that most of the fiascos we see in the world over the last hundred years or so, are made by states that are not as powerful as they wish they were? For example many of the de-colonized states in the 1950s and 1960s have all the high-modernist rhetoric, but much less muscle power?

I think that is a valid criticism of my book. In that regard two things are true. First of all there is this moment of the high tide of high modernism, and this moment does not exist anymore. That is to say that today none of us has this blind faith in science, technology, and experts. We have seen how this can go wrong and we have seen the current state of life on the planet, of extinction of species, and so on. It seems to me that we now live in a moment in which the illusions of high modernist, technical solutions as the answer to human problems are not only gone, but that now there is a kind of resistance and skepticism even to good science. I think the moment the book describes has passed. You could argue – although I do not – that the skepticism has become too great and prevents things that might be good from happening.

If the high modernist moment is over, then 'Seeing Like a State' is about a specific period. How would you demarcate this period, the 1880s to the 1960s?

Something like that. I think it depends slightly on geography. The Third World's high modernist romance is later because it comes with independence. You could argue that the European romance of high modernism ends earlier than the American romance. The First World War, in which people have seen what industrialized slaughter can do, marks the end of high modernism in Europe. The poets, the novels, and so on all changed radically as a result of the war. Because the Americans were much less personally touched by the First World War, because of their booming economy and their victory of the Second World War, I think that the American romance with high modernism went on into perhaps the Earth Day and the environmentalist movement. I do not think it is possible to talk about high modernism without some specificity about geography and cultures and so on.

Do you think that environmentalism and concern for the environment has been one of the main reasons for undermining the romance with high modernism?

I do not think I have thought carefully about this, but do you not think, we somehow realize collectively that we have ‘pissed in the soup’? In the year 1750 there were three quarters of a billion of us, and now we are going on eight billion. We are the most dangerous, invasive species that the world has ever seen, and I believe it is completely obvious to all of us that sustaining the contemporary lifestyle of wealthy Europeans for the whole world is ecologically unsustainable given the sort of resources we have. I am very much taken with Elizabeth Kolbert’s book *The Sixth Extinction*⁵ about the way in which we determine the life conditions and survival of every other species on earth. We are like zoo-keepers that do not quite know what they are doing. It is too strong to call this an apocalyptic vision, but I think that almost everyone who is conscious, is looking over their shoulder and asking ‘what are we heading towards?’. Somehow the aggregate effects of our activities in mining and transportation, our combustion engines and fossil fuels have ended up jeopardizing our future and the future of all the other species with which we share the planet. For some people I suppose the realization of this comes with the first Earth Day in 1970.

In ‘Seeing Like a State’ high modernism appears as a European project. Your first case is from Prussia in the eighteenth century, high modernism is then traced across Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and when finally we go to Tanzania in the 1960s, they are described as ‘consuming’ Western modernity. Much historical scholarship in the last twenty years has attempted to show that you find similar modernizing, state-building projects in the Ottoman Empire or in eighteenth-century China. Do you think that high modernism as it develops in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is a specifically European project, something that came from Europe and then moved outwards?

My assumption was exactly that it was a European ‘export’ if you like, which some countries like the U.S. adopted and then propagated themselves. I would be prepared to be shown differently: that the Ottoman Empire or Qing China had similar projects of simplification, similar ways of looking at their population. At that level the state simplification project goes back much, much further. It goes back to the Roman castra, which was exactly the same everywhere it was put down; to the Spanish town plan with the plaza and the cathedral and the market, which was applied all over Latin America; to things like cadastral surveys and population lists. This is what I think of as the quartermaster’s eye, which always wants to regularize and create a legible population.

The Japanese case of imitating European models is well chronicled, how they sent delegations to Germany, to the US, and so on trying to figure out how to struc-

5 Kolbert: *The Sixth Extinction: an unnatural history*.

ture their institutions so that they would become a modern, progressive, dynamic country. It seems to me that these imitative efforts occurred because Germany, France, US, and so on have gotten a reputation of being the most advanced, scientific countries. The imitating countries thought that if they got the 'magic formulas' right then everything else would follow: if they got the constitution right, the institutions would follow. It seems to me that it was the scientific and economic charisma of industrialization in the West that drove this imitation. Therefore, I am assuming that this process went only in one direction. I am sure that when these things reached Japan and the Ottoman Empire they were changed by local conditions, local cultural assumptions, and so on, so they did not look like they would in Germany, but that is what I would think of as a vernacularization of a kind of 'universal'.

But a 'universal' grown in the West?

Again, I would be happy to be shown differently. But I think of the "heartland" of industrialization from 1810 to 1930 as being essentially the West. And if you ask yourself why Nyerere was embarrassed by 'his own' peasants, I think it was because he had a western, missionary education and he thought that it was uncivilized not having a permanent place to live, and that it was only if the peasants were settled down that he could deliver health care, clean water, and schools. But he basically thought that the peasants' way of living was not civilized, and he knew this from his comparisons to the West. If you think of Atatürk's reforms in Turkey and Reza Shah's in Iran these were radical modernization projects that tried to change everything about what people wore, their names, and so on. Of course there was a backlash eventually in each of these places though it took a long time to develop.

Perhaps we could end on a more theoretical turf. There seems to be a significant inspiration from Michel Foucault in the way you write about the state's need to 'see' people in a certain regular way. At the same time your critics are also referring to Foucault and his notion of governmentality; to the state as being much more heterogeneous than you depict it. Can you say anything more about how you see your work in relation to Foucault's work?

Foucault has been extremely influential to me, especially *Discipline and Punish*.⁶ Moving from demonstrative, public humiliations and punishment to the penitentiary and the effort to create a kind of scientific council regime is a brilliant take. I am in debt to Foucault. However, one of the things that he promised to do was a

6 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

'micropolitics of resistance'-analysis. He keeps saying that his analysis can be applied to resistance practices and so on, but he never gets around to it, partly because he is so good at describing the governmentality effects. I think of my work, including work before and after *Seeing Like a State* such as *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*, as in a sense describing practices that I believe Foucault would have had something more intelligent than I to say about, but never got around to writing about.

James C. Scott was interviewed by Niels Brimnes and Casper Andersen in Aarhus 18 May 2015. Thanks to student assistant, Astrid Ølgaard Christensen for transcribing the sound file.

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