AEGIS le Libellio d'

TIRÉ A PART

Kogut Bruce (2006) "De l'échec des bonnes intentions étatiques", *Le Libellio* d'Aegis, n° 3, juin, pp. 1-3

Sommaire

De l'échec des bonnes intentions étatiques

James Scott, Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have failed, New Haven:Yale University Press, 1998, 445 p.

The book *Seeing Like a State* by James Scott has the piercing subtitle of 'how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.' It is a subtitle that elegantly summarizes the argument that our times are still marked by the 'high modernism' of the late 1800s and 20th century in which the belief in the power of science to solve social ills was at its height. The pertinence of this argument is all the greater in the few years since the book's publication. We still wrestle continually with social policies advocated unequivocally by scientists that are soon discarded for a new set of policies fervently advocated. Scott wants us to temper our zealotry by his vignettes of past cycles of advocacy and failure.

At heart, Scott is a Greek dramatist who understands how hubris leads to human tragedy. Neither the politician nor the scientist is spared in his analysis of failed urban and agrarian policies of the past century and half. Unlike a Greek tragedy in which the victim is the protagonist, Smith paints a more grim canvas in which efforts by ideologues 'assured of certain certainties', to remember a phrase of T.S. Eliot, create ecological and human disasters for society at large. Because Scott appears sceptical of any hope of 'accountability' to deter bad policies, he offers instead an enlightened critique of urban and agrarian policy disasters that does not entertain the illusion that our great scientific solutions will be much better in the future. Another approach is required.

The book begins with the engaging story of the 19th century efforts in Prussia to transform forests into timber farms. The underbrush was cleared, Norwegian firs imported and planted in tidy grids, and the initial results were astounding. However, decades later, as the second generation of trees were planted, the results were troubling: growth was unremarkable and the trees were subject to disease. In hindsight, the early experience profited from the rich soil, which once depleted, could not be replenished by a now lost diverse ecological system. This history tells the essential learning in the book: the incomplete nature of our knowledge, the value of diversity as insurance against ignorance, the long delays in causal observations that impede rapid correction of mistaken policies.

The root problem, Scott insists, is the ill appreciation of local knowledge, which he calls practical knowledge borrowing a term from the Greeks of 'metis.' A principal agent in this neglect is the State, which he aptly notes is a recent historical evolution that usurped the older body of custom that constitutes Society. In this account, Scott abstracts from his allegory of forestry science and the older domainal forests to identify the hand of agency in the State. The State is the willed application of categorization, indexation, and science that is blind to the value offered by the diversity of traditional Society.

Scott is no demagogue, and hence he is able to place these misguided efforts in the context of their times. He provides a sympathetic history of Haussmann's hygienic transformation of Paris that created a more monumental and less deadly city, while observing that the grands boulevards permitted more rapid military responses to worker rebellions. However, he shows no sympathy for the urban deserts created or proposed by Le Corbusier and his followers. Brazil's artificially created capital, Brasilia, is described as 'lacking corners' and spaces that provide random interactions that is Society. Much like cynicism grew into art in central Europe under communism, the inhabitants of Brasilia cope with their arid environment by self-reflections on their 'brasilite' lives that lack the daily pleasures of bustling and disordered streets.

As much as Scott has a good eye for the urban disasters of capital cities, he is clearly in his own element in discussing his principal field of agrarian sociology. At one point he writes, 'So far, we have considered only the husked grain. What if we broaden our view to take in the rest of the plant?' The passage reflects a charming nonchalance of a man lost in conversation, walking along the edge of a field of corn, picking up a cob, studying its significance to the farming village down the road, and then setting his gaze more broadly on the rest of the corn plant and thus on all humanity. The reader cannot be but impressed by this graceful athleticism of Scott's vision that masks the hard work in distilling his central observation: the science of agricultural policies, when coupled with the power of the State, has created a devastating loss of life and welfare.

In this vein, he singles out the easy target of Stalinist policies to collectivize Soviet agriculture. The more engaging account is his analysis of Julius Nyerere's efforts to socialize agriculture in Tanzania starting in the 1960s. Here the reader could have wished for more details regarding the intellectual endorsement of these policies by the international aid agencies of well-meaning countries, e.g. Sweden, and by international financial institutions.

It is only at the end of his book that Scott offers his counsel to be more attentive to local knowledge and to humble engagements in experimentation. He makes the intriguing observation of a passage from his Chinese cookbook that recommends to 'heat the oil until it is almost smoking'. The recipe assumes, he notes, that the cook has made enough mistakes to know what oil looks like just before it burns. It is this practical knowledge that should be respected in policy formulations. Scott offers the prescription of intellectual modesty and a preference for diversity as a safeguard against the homogenising currents that guide the science of policy advocacy.

There is a less emphasized message to Scott's analysis, namely his admiration for the resources in practical knowledge to problem solve and to innovate. Thus, he notes that statisticians can understand risk of sea voyages in relation to the probability distributions of accidents. But for the sailor or captain, it is the single event that matters; practical knowledge is the ability and experience necessary to influence the outcome, to improve the odds. Scott is ever the American pragmatist, who knows for every dilemma, there is a solution.

Briefly and quietly, perhaps to underscore his message, Scott offers a few 'rules of thumb', of practical knowledge, that might help development planning. These in-

clude 'take small steps', favour reversibility, plan on surprises, and plan on human inventiveness. These rules fall short of grand prescriptions, and in this sense, remain loyal to his cautionary tale.

Towards the end of his book, Scott cites a passage from Sinclair Lewis' novel *Arrowsmith* which is a story of the life of an immigrant doctor from Germany to the United States and his belief in science. 'They said… that he was so devoted to Pure Science… that he would rather have people die by the right therapy than be cured by the wrong.' I read this novel as a boy upon the advice of an uncle who said it changed his life when he read the story at my age. I thought it was a sad book.

Scott's book is also sad, for any social scientist can name a half dozen contemporary policies informed by the best of science that reflect more intellectual hubris than common sense. Many of the advocates of the underlying ideas would retrospectively agree that the implemented policies were wrong. And with little reflection, they then turn to you to say, 'ah, that is because we did not know then what we know now'. At this moment, the only proper response is to place firmly in their hands the gift of James Scott's magisterial book ■

Bruce Kogut
INSEAD

Secrétariat de rédaction et mise en forme : Michèle Breton