CSSH NOTES

James C. Scott. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale Agrarian Studies, Yale University Press, 1998.

James Scott is known for portraying the moral world of peasants, showing how they have resisted the encroachment of capitalism and the state. Now he investigates the other side: the experts, bureaucrats, and revolutionaries whose grandiose schemes to improve the human condition have inflicted untold misery on the twentieth century. *Seeing Like a State* can be read, along with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine*, as a classic of "structural dysfunctionalism." The point (put metaphorically) is not merely that the cure for social ills has proven inadequate—but that the disease inhered in the diagnosis, and that failure will continue so long as the doctors prevail.

The dysfunction, Scott argues, derived from three modern conditions. One was the ambition to remake society (and ecology) to conform to a rational plan. It is the conviction—expressed by such varied characters as Robert Owen, Le Corbusier, and Mao (pp. 117, 341)—that the present is a blank sheet, to be inscribed at will. Putting this into effect required a second condition: comprehensive information about individuals and property, gathered by a centralized bureaucracy. The third condition, what made the combination lethal, was a states sufficiently powerful to force its radically rational schemes on its 'beneficiaries.' This was characteristic of post-revolutionary and post-colonial regimes, and so the book devotes chapters to collectivization in the Soviet Union and *ujamaa* "villagization" in Tanzania. But the basic vision, Scott emphasizes, was common to experts everywhere. Three Americans planned a Soviet *sovkhoz* in their Chicago hotel room; a democratic populist built Brasília, which is also accorded a chapter.

In probing the pathology of planning, Scott brilliantly exposes how experts conflated aesthetics with efficiency. They believed that social and ecological organization was rational only insofar as it conformed to their visual aesthetic (here called "high modernism"). This meant the repetition of identical units, preferably in the form of a geometrical grid. It also entailed spatial segregation: each activity or entity must be allocated its own place. Polycropping was thus anathema to agricultural scientists, as mixed-use was to urban planners. What experts envisaged, of course, was how the thing appeared—from above—on a map or in a model. Along with aesthetics went gigantism, as scale too was confused with efficiency. The space of the plan existed outside geographical local-

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ity and historical contingency—obstacles to be eradicated. An ideal city, for example, could be sited anywhere in the world; once built, it would never change. Planners created new spaces in order to create new people, the productive and contented automatons imagined by (say) Frederick Taylor or Lenin.

In analyzing their failure, Scott is most valuable for drawing parallels between society and ecology. Collectivized agriculture was doubly deficient, in its use of natural resources and of human beings. Forests as well as cities created on geometrical lines inevitably degenerated. In both realms, radical "simplifications" destroyed the adaptability and stability that had evolved organically. Scott introduces the Greek word *mētis* (crafty intelligence) to describe the local, unwritten knowledge gained through practice or accumulated over generations. It was adequate to the diversity of natural environments, and was distributed throughout society. This kind of knowledge was disregarded or dismissed by experts. And yet, ironically, their plans would have been still more disastrous without the *mētis* of people subjected to them. Collectivized peasants farmed private plots for the black market; workers in Brasília built shantytowns outside the city.

From an anarchist understanding, Scott has come close to Edmund Burke (never cited directly, though see p. 424). Two centuries ago, he witnessed the eruption of utopian schemes in France and their imposition on India, and realized that the combination of abstract reason and untrammeled power is infinitely destructive. "I cannot conceive how any man can . . . consider his country as nothing but *carte blanche*—upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases." His defense of "prejudice" resembles Scott's appreciation of *mētis*. The similarity is remarkable given their inimical ideals, aristocratic hierarchy versus democratic equality. If Scott does not fully appreciate his affinity with Burkean conservatism, he does not quite extricate himself from Hayekian liberalism (see p. 8). He succeeds in showing how the ideas behind collectivized agriculture came from plans for giant capitalist farms. Nevertheless, liberal economies are not so prone to pathological dysfunction, because firms are constrained by the need to attract free labor and to make profits. True, as Scott observes, the state often favors inefficient large enterprises (like plantations) because they are easily taxed; they also wield sufficient influence to obtain protection. The reader is left, however, wondering how he will resist being appropriated by opponents of (democratic) 'big government.'

Other questions too remain. Scott asserts a continuity of aim between absolutism and totalitarianism; twentieth-century states simply fulfilled the dreams of their dynastic precursors. Do we really know that such vaunting ambition was common to rulers everywhere, or was it peculiar to Europe since the Renaissance? Scott's critique of pseudo-rational knowledge bears directly on our own disciplines. Many versions of social science proceed from the same assumptions that have been falsified in the ghastly experiments of our century. How can social scientists analyze the irreducible complexity of society, gener-

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alize without effacing the particularity of history and geography? In raising such difficult—and fruitful—questions, *Seeing like a State* is a book of immense importance. It must be read by anyone seeking to understand the modern world.

———Michael Biggs, University of Oxford

Kerwin Lee Klein. *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890–1990*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 377 pp.

Michael Leroy Oberg. *Dominion and Civility: English Imperialism and Native America, 1585–1685*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, 239 pp.

Historians define their jobs as the writing of history. Often, they look past their discipline to simply carry out the discipline's mandate. Yet Klein's project situates itself in the very question of disciplinarity, epistemology, and narrative. The study questions how history has been written by all sorts of professionals. The main concern of the book is to track historical treatments in general, and those of America in particular. Klein's other concern is with how history has been used and interpreted throughout the professional disciplines of literature, philosophy, and anthropology. Because of the powerful symbolism of the frontier, Klein uses this myth to explore visions of the past.

Klein's material includes work from Frederick Jackson Turner, John Dewey, Margaret Mead, and James Clifford. Klein employs a dialectic between history and philosophies of history. Ultimately, his interest lies in popular memory. The underlying theme to the book is the relationship between people who have been denied a place in history and how their understandings of history provide philosophers of history with new modes of analysis. Klein bravely confronts the divide between objectivity and subjectivity. In no way does he aim to privilege the subjective over the objective, or even to reinscribe their multiple and nefarious associations. Klein counters the equation of subjectivity with literary analysis, the feminine, and the oppressed with the idea that all arguments are contingent and even partial. Amazingly, Klein does not descend into a bottomless pit of textual analysis in which everything means simultaneously nothing and everything. For Klein, the West is the virtual space where the historical and the non-historical defied and defined each other. Drawing on Hegel, Klein concedes that America is still trapped in a dialectic which struggles to drown out the voices of the non-historical with the historical.

Like those he studies, Klein employs a straightforward historical analysis, beginning in the late nineteenth century and moving forward in time to the late twentieth century. Although many would see the new Western history as the inevitable resolution of Hegel's dialectic, Klein portrays this revisionism as incomplete. For Klein, we remain embroiled in the clash between those who write history and those whose histories have yet to be written. His approach is also standard in its employment of the tenets of intellectual history. Although the

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book began as an attempt to situate Native American responses to anthropology, the study deals mostly with elitist interpretations of history and the West.

The book's contributions are many. Klein ably describes and decodes the historical legacy of the famous and not-so-famous, thus filling a crucial gap in our understanding of the practice of American history. The study offers students of American historiography a crucial reading of the legacy of our intellectual forefathers.

Where Klein's work situates itself in the idea of history, Oberg delves into the metaphorically driven world of the seventeenth century. The clash between people with and without history, as Klein frames it, is nowhere more overdetermined than in discussions of colonial America. Colonial Indian history is attracting new attention and scholars such as Jill Lepore are writing important books on the topic. Their contributions lie in their reinterpretation of what historians have long known about: wars, misunderstandings, cultural clash, intermarriage, treaties.

Oberg provides his readers with an able response to Klein's call for contingency. As much as one is able, Oberg takes the reader back to the historical scene in that he abandons any sense of predetermination. He assumes the outcome could have been different and looks at the events of the seventeenth century as they happened and for what they were, not what we now know they turned out to mean.

Oberg's title speaks to his analysis. Unlike many colonial historians look at only one of the colonial powers, he places the English in the larger context of their contest with the Dutch, French, and Spanish. This only adds to our sense that the America of today was the only possibility. Instead of abandoning the notion of the frontier, Oberg redefines the term: Frontiers are better conceived of as zones of intercultural contact, involving two or more groups, no single one of which can dictate unilaterally the nature of the ensuing relationships.

Dominion and Civility charts a story in which neither party is victor nor victim. Indians and Europeans held sway in different ways at different times. Not only does Oberg expand his analysis to include other colonial powers, he expands it geographically to include the European continent with its kings and queens, and the conquest of Ireland. Oberg views European civility as stemming from a providentialist interpretation of the world. Along with their apocalyptic notions, Europeans felt compelled to convert all non-Christians. Yet even during these early moments, there were men Oberg refers to as "metropolitans" (Hariot, Raleigh, Hakluyt) who were firmly at odds with such religious ideology. More importantly, the actual colonists held values quite different from those who wrote about and planned colonization. These were people escaping bleak spiritual and social conditions at home. They came seeking ways to make money as quickly and cheaply as possible. At the same time, because of trade and war, local tribes became more sedentary and incorporated new economic modes, strategies, and needs. Due to war and disease, balances of pow-

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er between tribes were constantly shifting, allowing previously less powerful tribes or leaders to fill power vacuums for their own purposes.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, however, European civility and inclusion gave way to dominion. Oberg argues that despite the outcome, European civility and its competition with economic motives is critical to our understanding of encounters between Indians and Europeans in the early colonial period. *Dominion and Civility* is well-researched and well-written. The study contributes to the growing field of critical works on colonial American history.

———Liza Black, University of Michigan

James Krippner-Martínez. *Rereading the Conquest. Power, Politics, and the History of Early Colonial Michoacán, Mexico, 1521–1565.* Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.

The Conquest of Mexico has long been cast as a tale of villains and heroes. The dastardly Nuño de Guzmán, we have been told, was the cruelest of conquistadors, massacring Indians everywhere, particularly in Michoacán where he tortured and summarily executed Cazonci, despite the fact that the Purhépecha ruler had originally struck a deal with Hernán Cortés. Vasco de Quiroga stands at the other end of the spectrum. This learned humanist bishop, we are told, single-handedly built utopian village-hospitals in Michoacán to shelter the Indians from the likes of Nuño de Guzmán. In this Manichean narrative of the Conquest, natives are either killed or saved by Spaniards. James Krippner-Martínez seeks to restore some Indian agency conspicuously missing in such simple-minded accounts. More important, he seeks to explain how these narratives came about in the first place.

To restore native agency, Krippner-Martínez reads colonial sources "against the grain," and the evidence they yield is abundant and uncontroversial. The legal proceedings and trial records against Cazonsi assembled by Nuño de Guzmán to justify the summary execution of such an important regional lord (*Proceso* 1533), demonstrate that for ten years (1521–1530) the natives had been making the lives of Spanish colonists and missionaries miserable, resisting their expansion at every step. Nuño de Guzmán's brutal actions simply sought to assert direct Spanish control on local lands and peoples without having to rely on untrustworthy proxy local rulers. The *Relación de Michoacán*, a chronicle put together by a Franciscan missionary in 1541, however, shows that this new phase of Spanish colonialism was immediately met by an alliance of local Purhépecha lords and Franciscans, to stem the rising power of lay colonists. In fact the new social and sexual arrangements encouraged by the missionaries might have given the lords greater power over the female population and commoners at large. Finally, the very writings of Vasco de Quiroga and even those of Pablo Beaumont, an eighteenth-century Franciscan who put together a mammoth *Crónica of Michoacán* (1788), show that the so-called "spir-

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itual conquest" of Mexico was a perpetual affair, incomplete at best, rickety and precarious always.

That the natives resisted and cunningly looked after themselves is not surprising. More surprising, however, is that Manichean narratives of conquest, with their villains, spiritual heroes, and passive Indians, could have been imagined in the first place. Here Krippner-Martínez is at his best. He persuasively demonstrates that Nuño-Guzmán was not unusually cruel; in fact he acted as a representative of the Spanish colonial state. That he soon came to be seen as a deviant speaks to the triumph of his rivals, namely Hernán Cortés and the Franciscan missionaries. More important, the trope of Nuño-Guzmán as a bloodthirsty psychopath played well in the hands of a colonial state. The crown could now claim that it had disciplined the outlaw and brought justice to the former frontiers. Likewise, the image of the saintly, enlightened humanist Vasco de Quiroga was a late colonial construct, first put in circulation by Creole patriots in the diocese of Michoacán. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Vasco de Quiroga was deployed to serve new agendas, including Porfirian and Revolutionary efforts to integrate both the pre-colonial and colonial pasts into narratives of evolutionary progress and *mestizaje*. Why and when the discourse of the passive Indian began to circulate in the colonial period (and what role Indian elites might have played in its crafting and circulation) is something Krippner-Martinez unfortunately does not address.

———Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra

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