Seeing like a State.

A View on University Life from Below.

Par Mario Rutten



It’s been a long time since academic discussions about research and teaching were part of the board meetings of the department of Anthropology and Sociology of the University of Amsterdam. Most of our meetings today deal with administrative problems only. Sometimes these departmental meetings are followed immediately by teaching obligations. Usually, I find it hard to quickly change my mindset from discussing administrative problems with colleagues to teaching social science theory to students of anthropology. Occasionally, I do not experience a break between our departmental meeting and my teaching tasks. In those instances, I am able to use our discussion on administrative problems within the University to illustrate and explain wider social science theory to our students. What follows is one such example.

One morning, we had a board meeting of our department in which we discussed the plan for a new organisational setup of our faculty for the coming years. Although the plan mainly concerned the financial structure, it also reflected the new organisational setup that was about to be introduced. The aim of the new organisational structure was to gain better insight into the ‘work

flows' within our part of the University in order to achieve higher efficiency in teaching and research. For this, a strict division was introduced between academic and non-academic tasks, and among the academic tasks between teaching and research. Over the years, our department of Anthropology and Sociology had more and more come to resemble an 'employment agency,' which 'manages' a number of academic staff members whose research time is to be 'bought' by a research institute and whose teaching time is to be 'paid' for by a teaching institute. All the tasks of these academic staff members are quantified and each activity of a staff member can be assigned to one institute only, either to a teaching institute or to a research institute. Optimistically, these institutes are referred to as 'profit centres' in the new faculty plan.

In our board meeting that morning we discussed the implications of the new housing policy for our department. Based on a recently introduced system of 'leasing and letting' of office space within the University, a bookkeeper in the faculty had calculated the costs of our department in terms of office space. He concluded that we use too much space in relation to the number of staff members employed. This partly had to do with the fact that our department is housed in a historical building in the centre of Amsterdam. Not originally designed as an office, it consists of too many 'useless' square meters. It turned out that our corridors are too wide and our toilets too big. That morning, six professors in anthropology and sociology looked into this matter, but we had no idea how to solve this problem. One of us suggested that we could maybe save money if we decided to only use part of the corridors, and that we could maybe cut costs by not using all the toilets. In the end, we concluded that our 'overspending' on housing was probably only a temporary problem. The board of the University had already decided to move our department from our 17th-century building in the centre of Amsterdam to a new high-rise office building a bit further away in about five years time.

The newly introduced 'leasing and letting' model that we discussed that morning was part of a new overall housing policy of the University, in which all the departments of our faculty were to be housed within one large building. From an academic point of view, there was hardly a need to do so. Our Faculty of Social and Behaviourial Sciences was an organisational merger of two faculties that hardly had any links in terms of teaching and research activities. The aim of the organisational merger and geographical concentration was to cut costs and to achieve higher efficiency in terms of office space and teaching output. Many colleagues expressed their doubts about that. 'It might indeed look nice from above, with each faculty of our University nicely concentrated in one location, maybe even with its own colour on the map of Amsterdam, but whether this will work for us as a department remains to be seen,' one of my colleagues remarked after our board meeting that morning.

Less than one hour later, I could use this example of the housing policy in a lecture to anthropology students on James Scott's book *Seeing like a State* (1998). In this book, Scott explains why large scale projects of state planning that were originally set up to improve the human condition so often go wrong. To substantiate his argument, he uses examples of large-scale social engineering schemes in the field of forestry, agriculture, urban planning, and rural development. Scott shows how all these schemes were set up with the intention to improve the human condition by achieving higher efficiency: forests that consist of one type of tree planted in straight lines would allow for a better grip on nature and a higher output in terms of wood production; farming based on modern scientific agricultural methods would result in higher food production; and well-planned cities and villages, with a clear division between different uses of space, would be places in which people would feel much more comfortable to live.

In his book, Scott shows how all these large-scale schemes were predestined to fail from the start, causing great damage to people and nature. He speaks of a pernicious or fatal combination of four elements that together are responsible for these full-fledged disasters:

- a strict administrative ordering of nature and society that allows for the necessary 'legibility' that makes large-scale planning possible;
- a high-modernist ideology that provides the rationality, faith and motive to pursue the planning;
- an authoritarian state that provides the strength and power to implement the plan; and
- an incapacitated, weak civil society that provides the levelled social terrain on which to build without resistance.

It is the combination of these four elements that often results in large-scale failures. The strict administrative ordering of nature and society is often based on too drastic a simplification of reality. This simplification results in a loss of practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability, all of which are necessary to successfully execute any activity or plan.

This fatal combination of four elements, as described by Scott, shows remarkable similarities to the organisational changes that took place in our University over the past few years. Instead of

giving examples from my fieldwork experiences in Asia, I used the experiences from the board meetings of my department to illustrate James Scott's theory to the students. The same need for administrative ordering that preceded the implementation of large-scale schemes of state planning in Scott's book had also been at the root of the faculty plan for a new organisational setup that we had discussed in our board meeting that morning. The new housing policy was designed to provide the necessary administrative ordering. By way of geographical concentration into a few large buildings, the 'patchwork quilt' of institutes and departments spread over a large number of buildings in the city would become 'legible' to the administrators, the first element in Scott's analysis. The possibility that this 'patchwork quilt' of buildings could have promoted better working conditions, more contacts between staff members, and between staff and students, and could thereby have contributed to higher quality in teaching and research, was not being considered in the plan.

The need to make academic activities fully 'legible' has been visible within our University for quite some time already. With the aim to create a strict division between teaching and research activities, the administrators decided to set up separate 'teaching' and 'research institutes,' alongside the existing 'departments.' Those activities of the academic staff that did not fit into this strict division of teaching, research, and disciplinary department, were seen as useless activities and were made to disappear. This was especially true for all kinds of interdisciplinary and other border-crossing activities that suddenly found themselves labelled as 'problematic', as they did not fit into the newly introduced organisational structure. As Asia specialists, we were one of them. In an earlier period, we had been asked by the governing body of the faculty and University to organise region-based teaching on Asia and to promote activities that would cross the boundaries of education and research. The aim of this was to enhance cooperation between academic disciplines, and to bridge the gap between University and society. Despite the fact that we had been successful in our efforts on both these aspects, we had now suddenly become a problem to the administrators as we did not fit into their new organisational scheme of strict division between disciplinary departments, teaching institutes, and research institutes. Our task to cross the boundaries of the disciplines and to operate between teaching and research, and between University and society, did no longer fit into the new structure, and our activities were therefore partly dismantled. The need for administrative ordering in our University, the first element in Scott's analysis, turned out to be so strong that the earlier felt need to promote interdisciplinary activities and cooperation between University and society became of minor importance.

All the organisational changes that were implemented in my University over the past decade were based on a strong faith in social engineering, a complete trust in rationality, and in the idea that social change can and should be implemented from above. The underlying notion is that change can only be successful if based on blueprints, and that goals can only be worth pursuing if they are quantifiable and aimed at increasing efficiency. This strong faith in planning and control received a new impetus in 1997 with the acceptance by the Dutch parliament of the national law on the Modernisation of the University Administration, the so-called mub. In many ways this Modernisation of the University Administration provided the second element that Scott mentioned in his book, namely the existence of a high-modernist ideology that provides the rationality, faith and motive to pursue strict planning.

The third element of Scott's 'fatal' combination is an authoritarian structure that provides the power to implement the plan in a strict way. This was also made possible with the introduction of the mub law in 1997: heads of departments and directors of teaching and research institutes, were no longer a *primus inter pares*, proposed to the administrators from the department itself, but were directly appointed from above by the University administrators. Since then, all decisions are taken by what is locally termed the 'triangle,' a consulting body that some of my colleagues compared with the Triumvirate in the Roman empire, a trio of people at the top having all the power. The 'triangle' in our faculty consists of the head of the department, the head of the teaching institute and the head of the research institute. The position of academic advisor, who used to help us in developing disciplinary profiles and explicating academic objectives in teaching and research, had completely disappeared in the meantime. A high-modernist ideology does not require any academic profiles or objectives; only those activities that are quantifiable and that result in an increase in efficiency are considered to be worth of pursuing. It was no coincidence that the faculty plan we discussed that morning was written by the department 'Planning and Control.' Over the years, 'Planning and Control' had become the most powerful department in our faculty, providing the administrators with the necessary information and support to implement their desired organisational changes.

In the board meeting that morning, several colleagues had criticized the new housing policy. During the past few years, we had also criticized the plans to strictly divide our various academic tasks into several institutes, and to only measure those activities that can be quantified and follow the rules applied in other sciences. We had already began to experience the return of our annual reports on research output with zero points behind many of our activities that were not considered relevant from the administrator's point of view: reviews, articles in newspapers or in so-called non-refereed journals, membership of committees, referee activities for proposals or manuscripts,

lectures in other institutes, etc., etc. We pointed out that these activities are also vital to an academic discipline and that faculty plans should be more based on academic grounds. Moreover, we emphasised that there should also be room for activities that do not fit the strict division between research and teaching. Most of our criticism, however, was in vain, and our objections were brushed aside as being irrelevant. Once in a while, a colleague could not control him-/herself anymore and would ‘explode’ during a meeting because he/she could no longer face the increasing contempt that was shown for our academic work. But those were exceptions. After a while, most of the staff members in the department did no longer attempt to resist new plans but tried to continue with their work as best as possible, hoping that it would all blow over after some time.

This resignation in the inevitability of organisational changes from above resembles the fourth element that Scott mentions in his book, namely the presence of a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans and thereby provides the levelled social terrain on which authoritarian administrators can build. Scott shows how this feeling of powerlessness is often the result of earlier events, such as wars, revolutions, and economic crises; events that weakened the fighting spirit and stamina of a population. The changes that we discussed in our board meeting that morning were indeed part of a long history of organisational changes in our University that had resulted in various rounds of cutbacks and in a subsequent decline in the size of our staff, despite a large increase in number of students. Over the past few years, many staff members had been ‘asked’ to take early retirement and their positions were left open or were replaced by temporary staff with flexible contracts. Every now and then the administrators threatened that they would be ‘forced’ to implement a full reorganisation of the department if we would not accept their proposed changes. This long history of cutbacks, of organisational changes and of threats from above had resulted in the levelled social terrain that Scott mentions in his book, a levelled field in which it is relatively easy to implement changes without facing any large resistance from below, except maybe for a few outbursts by individual staff members.

Since then many more changes have been introduced in our department, most of them without providing an analysis of the problem to be solved or an evaluation of the results of earlier changes. While we were asked to change from a trimester to a semester system about six years back, we have now been told to prepare for a new change that will give the students not more than two subjects at the same time. But it was exactly such a system that we already had in place six years before! And while we were first asked to strictly organise our research and teaching activities per discipline, we are now told to provide for more thematic and interdisciplinary teaching and research programmes.

Although some of these changes in our faculty have been implemented only recently, several problems of earlier changes have already come to the surface. In a board meeting of our department some years back, the director of our teaching institute at that time had provided us with information on the costs and benefits for each programme and module. This overview showed that many of our modules and programmes made a ‘loss,’ even those that were able to get the maximum result in terms of student output. Moreover, the figures showed that it is almost impossible for a Master’s programme to make a ‘profit,’ and that a Master’s programme has a smaller ‘deficit’ when fewer students are participating. In short, within the new structure those Master’s programmes that were running well contributed most to the ‘deficit’ of the department, while a smaller number of Master’s students would mean less ‘loss’ to the department. When a colleague asked whether these figures implied that our department would benefit if we stopped teaching, her remark was seen as a lack of loyalty by trying to make fun of our new system. The administrators present saw the inconsistency in the figures as a temporary problem of an otherwise perfect system that would result in more output and higher efficiency. The fact that it might also have a negative effect on the motivation and commitment of the academic staff is not something they are concerned with.

Following my lecture on James Scott’s book *Seeing like a State*, I have realised that I should make more use in my academic work of my observations in regard to the university administration. As anthropologists we all aim to conduct participant observation. Over the past twenty-five years, however, I have seldom been able to fully participate in my fieldwork environment in Asia, but have mostly collected my data on the basis of observation and interviewing. During that same period, however, I participated in a university environment but seldom made use of my observation skills in that context. Such observations show that there are many similarities between the increasing audit culture in our University and the four elements mentioned by Scott on the implementation of large-scale state schemes.

At the same time, the examples in Scott’s book show that large-scale state schemes often have ‘fatal’ consequences for both the individuals concerned and society at large. A study of the various *triumvirates* during the Roman Empire shows that these triumvirates usually did not last long and often resulted in chaos. Although they would never openly admit it, the administrators of my University sometimes also seem to take that possibility into account. In the same week that we had to dismantle part of our Asia activities because they did no longer fit into the new organisational setup, an ‘evacuation chair’ was placed on our floor in the department. This evacuation chair was meant to, ‘in case of emergency, evacuate safely and quickly the injured and handicapped via the stairs.’ This new chair gave me some hope that, while making new plans

for the faculty, someone within the administration of the University might have seen the subtitle of Scott's book: *How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. In case this doom scenario of Scott's also becomes reality in my University, the evacuation chair will certainly come in handy.

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

Illustration: gwendolen, "4 mei", 4.5.2009, Flickr (Creative Commons license).