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Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa

ABSTRACT In this article, I seek to identify a limitation in the analysis James Scott offers in *Seeing Like a State* (1998) by asking to what extent his account of the follies of schemes for planned improvement by states provides critical leverage on the present world of neoliberal global capitalism. Scott has claimed that a dynamic of standardization, homogenization, and grid making applies not only to developmentalist states but also equally to the contemporary world of downsized states and unconstrained global corporations. I contest that claim by tracing how recent capital investment in Africa has been territorialized, and some of the new forms of order and disorder that have accompanied that selectively territorialized investment. Because such investment has been overwhelmingly in mineral resource extraction—particularly in oil—a contrast will become visible between the homogenizing, standardizing state optic Scott analyzed and a rather different way of seeing, proper to the contemporary global oil company. [Keywords: Africa, capital, space, corporations, oil]

IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE to be a part of this special forum devoted to the work of one of anthropology's greatest cross-disciplinary interlocutors, James Scott. Scott has repeatedly reconfigured important debates in our field by weaving diverse empirical observations together into remarkably powerful synthetic visions. From *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) to *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) to *Seeing Like a State* (1998), Scott's scholarship has not only answered important questions but also opened up whole new fields of inquiry and given us rich analytic tools for continued study of those fields.

Scott's works have achieved an influence, and a cross-disciplinary impact, that anthropologists rarely, if ever, manage to match. In part, I think, this is because he does not hesitate (as anthropologists so often do) to make general claims and arguments of broad application. The clarity and power of Scott's analytic vision make it easy to apply his theoretical schemes to a wide range of cases; indeed, once we have learned about "moral economies," "weapons of the weak," or "state simplifications," we tend to see them almost everywhere we look. This broad applicability is the best sort of evidence of the conceptual power and reach of the theoretical frameworks Scott has developed. But it also raises questions about where to locate the limits of applicability of these frameworks.

Such a question of limits is raised in considering the contemporary implications of the brilliant analysis Scott offers in his most recent book, *Seeing Like a State*. The question I want to pose here concerns the extent to which Scott's account of the follies of schemes for planned improvement by developmental or socialist states provides us with critical leverage on our present world—one characterized by the end of most state socialisms, a deep skepticism about development, and the dominance of ideologies of "neoliberalism." Critical analysts of society are—like generals—always at risk of, as they say, "fighting the last war." Once the work of critique is done, we often look up to find that the struggles now are elsewhere, the dangers have changed. A new analysis is required.

Is that the case here? Scott explicitly considers this possibility in his introduction to *Seeing Like a State* (1998). He writes,

> As I finished this book, I realized that its critique of certain forms of state action might seem, from the post-1989 perspective of capitalist triumphalism, like a kind of quaint archaeology. States with the pretensions and powers that I criticize here have for the most part vanished or have drastically curbed their ambitions. [1998:7–8]

But he goes on to argue that this fear is misplaced, because global capitalism just does what the modernizing developmental state once did—only to a larger degree.

> Large-scale capitalism is just as much an agency of homogenization, uniformity, grids, and heroic simplification as the state is, with the difference that, for capitalists, simplification must pay. . . . Today, global capitalism

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is perhaps the most powerful force for homogenization. [1998:8]

It is this claim that I wish to contest here—not the main body of Scott's analysis (which could well be the subject of another article altogether). I address the almost tossed-off claim in the introduction to *Seeing Like a State* that the dynamic of standardization, homogenization, and grid making so convincingly identified as integral to "seeing like a state" applies equally well to our contemporary world of downsized states and unconstrained global corporations. This is a seductive slippage, which neatly fuses earlier work on modernist developmental states with contemporary "localist" critiques of a corporate "globalization" that would homogenize the world. Globalization, in this familiar view, is a process of ever-increasing rationalization, commodification, and standardization. Whether this is a matter of integrated global markets, homogenized global culture, shared global norms, or denationalized spaces of finance capital, the picture is one in which it is not the state, but "globalization" itself that is now the agent of increasing abstraction, worldwide integration, and standardization.

The trouble with such a fusion of eras is that it presents us with a vision in which "development," "the state," and "globalization" all come to appear simply as different aspects or moments of a single process. If developmentalist nation-states exercised power via technicizing and depoliticizing erasures of local particularity, in such an understanding, contemporary globalization simply takes this assault on the local to another level. Likewise, if developmentalist states once attempted to create nationwide "grids" of standardization and simplification, today it is global corporations that perform the same homogenizing operation at "the global level."

Here, I contest this common notion—that contemporary global capitalism works through a fundamental mechanism of homogenization and the gridlike standardization of space. I also challenge the related presumption that analyses developed to explicate the workings of developmental states somehow apply equally well to a contemporary world of downsized, postdevelopmental states and increasingly powerful and unconstrained global corporations. I do this by reviewing some of the ways that recent capital investment in Africa has been territorialized, and some of the new forms of order and disorder that have accompanied that selectively territorialized investment. Because recent capital investment in Africa has been overwhelmingly in mineral resource extraction—particularly in oil—a contrast will become visible between the homogenizing, standardizing optic Scott claimed was the characteristic mode of "seeing" of the developmental state, and a rather different way of seeing proper to the contemporary global oil company.

We have become used to a picture of Africa as a continent abandoned by global capitalism. But this is not quite right. In fact, there has been a significant expansion of capital investment in Africa in recent years. This investment has come only to certain countries, and it has been overwhelmingly in the area of mineral resource extraction. In the midst of what have been generally very hard times on most of the continent, mining and oil extraction have boomed in several countries. What is noteworthy is the extent to which this economic investment has been concentrated in secured enclaves, often with little or no economic benefit to the wider society. There are significant differences in the ways that such enclaves are secured, and the ways that they are governed (or not) by the states that have nominal jurisdiction over them.[1] Here, however, I briefly highlight some of the patterns that seem to be common to a number of contemporary African cases, in the hope that a broad-brush "big picture" may help us to see how different the political–economic logic of the privately secured enclave is from the universalizing grid of the modernist state described by Scott.

The clearest case of extractive enclaving (and no doubt the most attractive for the foreign investor) is provided by offshore oil extraction, as in Angola, where neither the oil nor most of the money it brings in ever touches Angolan soil. The country is one of the world's leading oil exporters, producing some one million barrels per day (bpd); this is projected to further rise within the next few years to two million bpd, which is substantially more than the current production in Kuwait. The Angolan government receives something on the order of $5 billion in oil revenue each year. Yet virtually all of the production occurs offshore (and increasingly in very deep water operations); very little of the oil wealth even enters the wider society (see Gary and Karl 2003; Global Witness 1999, 2002; Hodges 2001; Human Rights Watch 2001). In spite of some 25 years of booming oil production, Angolans today are among the most desperately poor people on the planet; furthermore, the country ranks near the very bottom of the usual indices of "human development" (161 out of 173 according to the UN Human Development Index [Gary and Karl 2003:31]). The industry imports virtually all its equipment and materials; in addition, it employs very few Angolans, relying for its skilled labor on crews of foreign workers brought in on short-term contracts. These workers live in a gated compound in Cabinda called Malongo, still surrounded by land mines from the civil war that wracked the country from 1975 to 2002. Workers come and go from the airport to their compound in helicopters, bypassing the surrounding town entirely (Christian Aid 2003:21).[2]

Increasingly, such territorial enclaves of mineral extraction are protected by private armies and security forces, as we see today in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance (Peleman 2000; Reno 2001b; Singer 2003). Indeed, the increasing technological sophistication and spatial isolation of enclaved mining operations makes mining (which traditionally involved large numbers of "locals") more and more like oil extraction (which has long operated in a more thoroughly "enclaved" manner; cf. Ferguson in press). Perhaps the most violent form of the project of disconnecting mineral production from the local population has been seen in the Republic of Sudan, where oil concessions have been advertised as existing on "uninhabited land"—land, that is, which paramilitaries have first systematically rendered uninhabited by driving off the residents (Christian Aid 2001). But this is only an extreme version of a very common maneuver, in that enclaves of mineral-extractive investment on the continent are normally tightly integrated with the head offices of multinational corporations and metropolitan centers, but sharply walled off from their own national societies (often literally walled, with bricks and razor wire).

It is worth noting that the movement of capital that is entailed in such enterprises is "global" in the sense that it crosses the globe, but it does not encompass or cover contiguous geographic space. The movements of capital cross national borders, but they jump point to point, and huge areas are simply bypassed. Capital does not "flow" from London to Cabinda; it hops, neatly skipping over most of what lies in between. When capital is invested in spatially segregated mineral-extraction enclaves, the "flow" of capital does not cover the globe, it connects discrete points on it.

Crucially, for our purposes here, such investments have mostly not entailed investment in the construction of national "grids" of legibility. This is in strong contrast to the situation in the late-colonial and early-independence periods in Africa, where mining investment often brought with it a far-reaching social investment. On the Zambian Copperbelt, for instance, the development of copper mining brought with it the construction of vast "company towns" for some hundred thousand workers—workers who, in time, came to be skilled, unionized, highly paid, and politically powerful. The mining towns—classic examples of colonial-era corporate paternalism—eventually came to include not only company-provided housing, schools, and hospitals but even social workers, recreational amenities such as movie theaters and sports clubs, and domestic education programs to make "housewives" and "modern mothers" out of workers' spouses (Ferguson 1999). Here, the business of mining—as exploitative as it undoubtedly was—entailed a very significant broader social project.

The gaining of independence in 1964 and the copper industry's 51-percent nationalization in 1969 only made the industry more thoroughly bound up with national-level social and political needs. The state depended on maintaining a political base in urban areas, and the powerful Mineworkers Union of Zambia was a force that could not be ignored. Urban wages rose sharply, while educated Zambians began to take on management positions in the industry. A 51-percent nationalization of the copper mines in 1969, promoted under then-President Kaunda's mildly socialist ideology of "Humanism," further cemented the association of the industry with the nation (Bates 1971, 1976; Daniel 1979). When the industry went into decline, starting in the mid-1970s, all the forms of social "thickness" that older workers today remember as the gains of this period—higher wages, good social services, powerful unions, and strong nation-state control over national wealth—were identified by the advocates of privatization and neoliberal reform as "inefficiencies" responsible for the industry's decline.[3]

In contrast, today's forms of capital investment in African mineral extraction have been noteworthy for their ability to bypass the nation-state frame altogether.[4] Where national states are weak, collapsed, or configured in such a way that they thrive less on order than on disorder, many sorts of capital investment are thereby discouraged. But such conditions need not inhibit mineral extraction. Replying to a question about political volatility at the 1998 annual meeting of the Panhandle Producers and Royalty Owners Association, former CEO of Halliburton (and current U.S. Vice President) Dick Cheney said: "You've got to go where the oil is. I don't think about it very much" (Christian Aid 2003:1).

According to the mythology of neoliberal globalization, the reforms of Africa's "structural adjustment" were supposed to roll back oppressive and overbearing states and to liberate a newly vital "civil society." The outcome was to be a new sort of "governance" that would be both more democratic and more efficient. Instead, the best scholarship on recent African politics suggests that the "rolling back" of the state provoked or exacerbated a far-reaching political crisis. As more and more of the functions of the state were "outsourced" to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), state capacity deteriorated rapidly. Joseph Hanlon has pointed out that this should hardly be surprising, because the higher salaries and better terms of employment offered by NGOs quickly "decapacitated" African governments by luring all the best civil servants out of the government ministries (Hanlon 2000). Those who remained were often paid less than subsistence salaries, with inevitable consequences. Deprived both of capable staff and of economic resources, states quickly became "hollowed out" (to borrow Christopher Clapham's [1996] phrase). State officials then set about a "privatization plan" of their own, what Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou (1999) have called "the criminalization of the state."

This has meant not homogenization within a national grid but, more often, the abandonment of the idea of national grids altogether, along with the intensive exploitation of separately administered enclaves. As I discuss elsewhere (Ferguson in press), this shift has meant that there has been an increasing acceptance of the idea that effective mineral production and endemic violence can coexist. In a number of cases—ranging from open civil war to prolonged low-level violence and insecurity—there has been a dramatic expansion in the role of private security companies and professional mercenaries in securing economically valuable enclaves on the continent (Ferguson in press; Lock 1998; Reno 2001b; Singer 2003), along with a weakening of effective central government in economically less-valued areas. Indeed, the use of private security companies has become routine in African mining operations, with the provision of security increasingly understood as "just another function [the companies] have to provide themselves, comparable to providing their own electricity or building their own infrastructure" (Singer 2003:227).

In fact, the picture that seems to emerge from the recent literature is that of two quite different kinds of governance, applied to the two different Africas that French colonialism once distinguished (as William Reno [1999] has reminded us) as *l'Afrique utile* and *l'Afrique inutile* (usable and unusable Africa). Usable Africa gets secured enclaves—noncontiguous "useful" bits that are secured, policed, and, in a minimal sense, governed through private or semiprivate means. These enclaves are increasingly linked up, not in a continuous, territorial national grid, but in transnational networks that link dispersed spaces in a selective, point-to-point fashion.

The rest—the vast terrain of "unusable Africa"—gets states increasingly disengaged from the project of governing national territories and—if spared from outright banditry and warlordism—a form of what I have elsewhere called "transnational governmentality" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Most often, this amounts to a kind of government by NGO, often in a humanitarian mode, with a hodgepodge of transnational private voluntary organizations carrying out the day-to-day work of providing rudimentary governmental and social services, especially in areas of crisis and conflict. Again, the work of government here does not unfold within a national grid; it is, instead, spread across a patchwork of transnationally networked bits.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of the recent Africanist literature concerns the relation between the World Bank and IMF projects for political reform and their desired goal of attracting capital and achieving economic growth. For the fact is that the countries that are (in the terms of World Bank–IMF reformers) the biggest "failures" have been among the most successful at developing capital-attracting enclaves. African countries where peace, democracy, and some measure of law obtain have had very mixed records in drawing foreign capital investment. But countries with what are, in conventional normative terms, the "worst" and "most corrupt" states, even those in the midst of civil wars, have often attracted very significant inflows. As William Reno (2001a:187) notes, an Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) study of investment patterns in developing countries showed that the five top recipients of foreign investment in the period 1994–96 in Africa fell into the study's "most risky" category. This short list was led by such unlikely paragons of "good government" as (1) Angola, (2) Congo–Zaire, and (3) Equatorial Guinea. Indeed, countries with raging civil wars and spectacularly illiberal governments have, on a number of occasions, proved to be surprisingly strong performers in the area of economic growth as well. Angola, for instance, actually had one of Africa's better rates of gross domestic product (GDP) growth during the war-torn (and, in human terms, horrific) 1980s; Sudan's 8.1 percent annual GDP growth rate for the 1990s put it comfortably at the top of the continental pack, notwithstanding one of the most brutal and intractable wars in recent memory (World Bank 2002).[5]

Such observations suggest that global capitalism has neither abandoned Africa nor swept it up in a grand process of global homogenization and standardization. Rather, capital "hops" over "unusable Africa," alighting only in mineral-rich enclaves that are starkly disconnected from their national societies. The result is not the formation of standardized national grids, but the emergence of huge areas of the continent that are effectively "off the grid." These areas are indeed in many ways excluded from "the global economy," as several theorists of globalization have noted. But the situation that comes into view from recent scholarship is not exactly the featureless void that Manuel Castells (2000) evokes in his characterization of Africa as a "black hole" of the information society. On the contrary, specific forms of "global" integration on the continent coexist with specific—and equally "global"—forms of exclusion and marginalization.

In some respects, of course, this "global" model of resource extraction is not new; it is quite old. In the early colonial period, in particular, private companies with their own private armies (from King Leopold's Congo to the British South Africa Company) long ago pioneered methods for securing economic extraction in the absence of modern state institutions.[6] Here, as in some other respects, the national economy model in Africa appears less as a threshold of modernity than a brief and abortive postindependence project. Yet the "old" model of privately secured, anational enclave production is also one that seems to have increasing application in the world today, when mineral-extraction investment in "unstable" environments is seen as "a growth industry," and the use of private military and security firms appears as a "cutting edge" new technology of spatial and social regulation.

Indeed, it is worth asking whether Africa's combination of privately secured mineral-extraction enclaves and weakly governed humanitarian hinterlands might constitute not a lamentably immature form of globalization but, rather, a quite "advanced" and sophisticated mutation of it. If so, the forms of "global economy" that have developed in some mineral-rich African countries in recent years might show us not only a theoretically interesting anomaly but also a frightening sort of political–economic model for some other regions that combine mineral wealth with political intractability.

One wonders, for instance, what sorts of mechanisms of government will emerge in the new Iraq. Will we see the emergence of a strong centralized state, legitimated through programs of national "development"? Or might Iraq instead be *developed* (if we care to use the term) along the lines of what we might call the "Angolan model"—wherein oil fields are secured, enclaved, and "globally" networked while the rest may be left to an endemic disorder or warfare that can conveniently be blamed on ancient primordial hatreds, irresponsible and corrupt political leaders, and so on, all loosely managed by networks of humanitarian NGOs.

I do not pretend to know, but a student of African political economy can hardly avoid noting certain parallels that seem to be emerging. Most obvious is a widespread reliance (both by private parties and the U.S. government) on "private military companies" (PMCs).[7] PMCs with names like Blackwater, Erinys, and Global Risk Strategies not only guard facilities and private individuals but also escort U.S. convoys through hostile territory, and often engage in sustained heavy fighting with Iraqi insurgents, using heavy weapons and even (in at least one case) private military helicopters (*New York Times* 2004). There are sound economic motives at work here. As one industry insider put it, "Why pay for a British platoon to guard a base when you can hire Ghurkas at a fraction of the cost?" (*Economist* 2004). Such forces are free from the constraints of usual military discipline; what is more, according to the Coalition Provisional Authority, private forces contracted to the coalition are not subject to Iraqi law either. And such outsourced firepower cuts down on political as well as economic costs (U.S. news media faithfully report the daily numbers of dead U.S. soldiers, but there is little notice or regret over the casualties taken by Fijian, Indian, or Iraqi "private contractors").

In another African parallel, U.S. proconsul Paul Bremer (like many an African "strongman") was protected not by his own national army but, instead, by hired guns (*New York Times* 2004), an arrangement that has been continued for the new U.S. ambassador, John Negroponte. Indeed, even the security of the "Green Zone" itself (the supposedly secure section of Baghdad that is the core of the U.S. military occupation) was put out for bidding to private security firms (*New York Times* 2004).

Most significant of all, perhaps, is that a single private company, Erinys, now commands a 14,000-strong private army charged with guarding Iraqi oil installations (*Economist* 2004). Like wartime Angola, Iraq currently boasts of continuing production in the midst of apparent chaos and war. One can imagine that, under conditions of prolonged civil strife, the private army guarding the oil installations may well be a more durable contribution to the Iraqi landscape than either the U.S. occupation force or its rhetorical commitment to democracy and "nation-building."

In any case, if we are to make progress in understanding these emergent forms of spatialized order and disorder, we will need to recognize that their logic is not simply one of an ever-expanding homogenization and standardization. New times bring new dangers, and new dangers require new tools for critical analysis.

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NOTES

1. Some of these differences are discussed in Ferguson in press. A full appreciation of the complexity of the interrelation between processes of enclave extraction and processes of government requires extensive ethnographic study in each case, work that in most cases has simply not yet been done (but see Watts 2004 for Nigeria). The highly simplified sketch I present here has its uses (I hope), but it cannot stand in for the detailed ethnographic accounts that, one hopes, will soon help to give us a more fleshed-out picture of the social and political life of African mineral-extraction enclaves.

2. The instructive case of Angola is discussed at greater length in Ferguson in press.

3. For a discussion of the industry's contraction, its causes, and its social consequences, see Ferguson 1999.

4. For this reason, the spatially differentiated forms of political order found in mineral-exporting "weak states" in Africa are quite different from the "graduated sovereignty" that Ong (2000) has described for Southeast Asia, which she conceives as a form of legal pluralization initiated by, and under the control of, sovereign nation-states.

5. Cited in World Bank (2002). See table 4–1. Electronic document, http://www.worldbank.org/data/wdi2002/tables/table4–1.pdf, accessed October 31.

6. Such historical precedents themselves may be present in the fantasies of an African "heart of darkness" that seem to animate investors and soldiers of fortune alike in their African ventures. As Tsing notes, the idea that "capitalism" today is characterized by a uniform condition of "space–time compression" is confounded by the apparently anachronistic creation of a very different sort of space proper to the frontier mineral boom, a space that, "far from miniature and easy . . . becomes expansive, labored, and wild, spreading muddy, malarial frontiers" (2001:186).

7. Indeed, the Angola watcher will have noted that among the "private contractors" killed in recent months were several former members of the apartheid-era security forces of South Africa, one of whom had admitted to crimes in an amnesty application to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*New York Times* 2004).

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