To absolutely no one's surprise, Zohran Mamdani defeated Andrew Cuomo Tuesday in the race for the Mayor of New York City, becoming the Big Apple's first Muslim mayor. Also to absolutely no one's surprise, much of the campaign against Mamdani descended into Islamophobia – less from Cuomo himself and more from his supporters and outside voices.

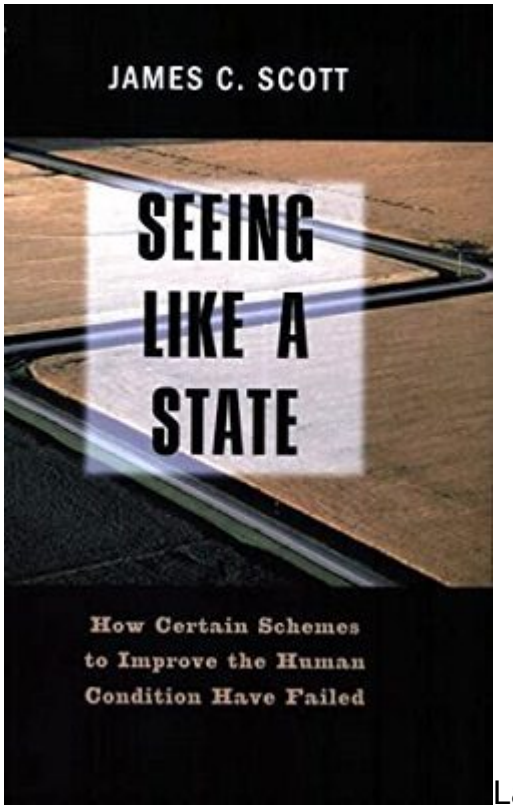
But Cuomo said one thing the week before the election that got him into hot water, which had interesting environmental implications – as well as for the academy.

Speaking on a television interview, Cuomo said, "Our diversity is our strength, but it can also be a weakness. So you have to work very, very hard to make sure you're always keeping people united, and there's always flare-ups among different races, religions, creeds for one reason or another."

This led the interviewer to push back, asking what Cuomo meant by diversity as a weakness. He responded, "Diversity can be a weakness if you have antipathy among groups." (He also got the host's name wrong, although he couldn't see him on his audio feed). Cuomo's statement seemed so jarring that the New York Times ran a story headlining it.

I found it to be an interesting exchange, because part of the modern catechism is the Diversity Is Our Strength, or even Diversity Is Our Greatest Strength. Google it: it won't be hard to find it everywhere.

But is it true?



Lately I have been reading James C. Scott's classic 1998 work, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* Scott makes the argument for diversity-is-strength in many places where one might not expect it, and it also shows the limits of the argument.

At 100,000 feet, Scott argues that the ideology of High Modernism, seeking to rationalize and standardize peoples and economies is often doomed to fail because it ignores how people actually operate and work, sidelines local knowledge, and tries to create Utopias based upon the simplified ideas of bureaucratic planners. High Modernism ignores and crushes diversity, leading to disastrous results.

Scott's book is particularly interesting because he applies this broad perspective to a host of examples that one would not normally think of. Right at the beginning of the book, he uses it in the context not of Leninist or fascist autocracy (although that gets there), but rather in the realms of – forestry and urban planning.


Monoculture: This Is Not A Forest

Nineteenth-century German planners, anxious at getting more production out of state-owned forests, planned them as monocultures and got rid of all the, well, diversity in them. This led to a substantial increase in wood production, but destroyed so much of the forest's value – not just aesthetic, but social. Villagers could not use it for grazing their animals, or resin, or bark and other plants for medicine. And eventually this led to the death of the forest because the monoculture could not survive on its own. It was much more susceptible to disease. It lost nutrients from biodiversity. It looked good on paper (so to speak), but it did work in the actual, organic world.

Similarly, High Modernist urban planning of the sort advocated by Le Corbusier, established efficient, clean cities such as Brasilia and Chandigarh that looked great from the air, but people did not want to live in. "The airplane indicts the city," Le Corbusier asserted; what he never showed is why such an indictment was relevant.


Le Corbusier: The Airplane Indicts The City

Scott contrasts Le Corbusier with Jane Jacobs, who fought this sort of High Modernist planning, and who emphasized the, well, diversity of uses and forms that make a city actually work. High Modernist development destroys cities because it does not account for how people actually live.

And yet.

Even Scott acknowledges that the modernists had a point. States want to make populations “legible,” in part to control them, but also to make their lives better. Consider a quaint, diverse, old-fashioned city – the sort that Americans love to visit. State planners can’t see it very well. In many ways that is good: it is resistant to tyranny, it is full of fascinating nooks and crannies, with an astounding array of different cultures and peoples and maybe even languages. It has its own organic way of operating.

But how do you run water and sewer pipes through there? What if there is a fire – how can emergency vehicles get there? It is so illegible that a public health department cannot know who is there, who has been vaccinated, who is at risk. The school system cannot determine where the children are and who has gotten an education. Obviously, old-fashioned European cities have pipes and sewers: but these were established through *destroying* a lot of their earlier diversity. Scott notes that Baron Haussmann, who created much of modern Paris, did so by razing several neighborhoods and moving some communities to its outskirts. Many European cities

destroyed their ancient walls and older neighborhoods to make them more legible and to create modern water and sanitation syste,

And this does not even begin to get at the externalities: if some cultures reject vaccines (as do a growing number of Americans), their refusal puts others at risk. If they reject education for their groups (as do, say, many ultra-orthodox Jews for women), then they risk impoverishing and burdening the entire nation and injuring those groups.

Similarly, think about the forest. A large part of the reason why the state wanted to increase wood production was so that it could tax it. But in many circumstances, those taxes went for things like national health insurance (which Imperial Germany established in 1883, decades ahead of every other nation). And that wood was used to build houses so that working class people did not live in huts.

As Scott points out, a whole series of things necessary for the administrative state rest on standardized weights and measures, which certainly destroy the diversity of local knowledge. He notes that a lot of common measures like “a handful” or “a cubit” could even vary from town to town. The only way to bring health care and education and host of services to people is to *destroy* their diverse forms of local knowledge.

Scott hates planners and he has a reason to. But he also concedes that this isn’t necessarily about planning per se as it is about ideology. He notes that during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, the SS kept exquisitely precise statistics about where every Jew in Amsterdam was, and this made the deportations to Auschwitz exquisitely efficient. But statistics can be used for many purposes: “they could have been used,” he observes, “to feed the Jews rather than to kill them.”

Back to Cuomo and diversity. He was right. Diversity is a strength and it is also a weakness. It needs to be nurtured and it needs to be destroyed. It needs to flourish outside of state control and it needs to be controlled by the state. Robert Cover, in his celebrated article “Nomos and Narrative,” seemed to decry the state’s destruction of diverse cultures, a trend he called “jurispathic.” But such jurispathic work is often necessary.

There is nothing particularly earth-shattering about all of this. “It’s complicated” is not an interesting conclusion. But diversity ***is*** complicated, in the environment as with everything else. And we are now dividing on it: this year, Secretary of Defense

Pete Hegseth has authored several speeches loudly proclaiming that “diversity is a weakness” – a line that has now become a catechism on the Right.

Wouldn’t it be nice if, in academia and politics, a critical mass of people could say “diversity is both a strength and a weakness”?? And people who are not serial sexual harassers like Cuomo? I won’t hold my breath.