



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The drama of development: The skirmishes behind high modernist schemes in Africa**

Bähre, E.; Lecocq, B.

### **Citation**

Bähre, E., & Lecocq, B. (2007). The drama of development: The skirmishes behind high modernist schemes in Africa. *African Studies*, 66(1), 1-8. doi:10.1080/00020180701275915

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/135648>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



## The Drama of Development: The Skirmishes Behind High Modernist Schemes in Africa

Erik Bähre & Baz Lecocq

To cite this article: Erik Bähre & Baz Lecocq (2007) The Drama of Development: The Skirmishes Behind High Modernist Schemes in Africa, *African Studies*, 66:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/00020180701275915](https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180701275915)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180701275915>



Published online: 01 Aug 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 828



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 6 View citing articles [↗](#)

# The Drama of Development: The Skirmishes Behind High Modernist Schemes in Africa

*Erik Bähre and Baz Lecocq*

*University of Amsterdam and the Center for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin*

## Freedom versus oppression<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *African Studies* arises out of a strong interest in, and fascination with, the nexus of development, power, and the state in Africa. At the core of this volume is a debate around Scott's seminal *Seeing Like a State*. His description of failed development projects, in Africa as well as elsewhere in the world, provides a fascinating political and historical analysis of projects carried out by authoritarian regimes. The contributors to this volume engage with his analyses by examining the intricacies of the state in a cross-regional comparison of African development projects, past and present. These contributions range from an analysis of *ujamaa* in Tanzania after independence (Leander Schneider), relocation and land in colonial Rhodesia (Guy Thompson), the development of a township settlement in post-apartheid South Africa (Erik Bähre), and development and live stock policy in twentieth century Namibia (Steven van Wolputte).

Never outside of the gaze of anthropology and history, the dominant neo-liberal discourse makes detailed historical and anthropological case studies of the dynamics of the state, power, and development ever more urgent. Not in the least because the neo-liberal amalgamation of development and freedom is fundamental to World Bank policy since the end of the Cold War. In its attempt to promote civil rights and liberties, the World Bank emphasises the crucial role of good governance, which should ensure that civil society is actively engaged in state initiated development.<sup>2</sup>

Is this view on the intricacies of development, the state, and authority justified particularly for Africa? Manzo (2003) argues that World Bank policy with regards to Africa is inherently paradoxical. Economic policies among others inspired by the Chicago School of Economics marginalise the state, yet at the same time the state should guarantee greater accountability towards non-governmental organisations (NGOs), citizens, and other stakeholders in the development process. Brett (2003) reveals a similar problem when he analyses development policy and participatory development. Participatory development often fails to

guarantee freedoms and instead is in danger of becoming a welcome excuse for the failure of development projects, manipulated to legitimise the ambitions of the development organisations (Brett 2003).

Thus there are good reasons to be critical of the amalgamation of development, the state, and freedom as envisioned by the theorists and advocates of capitalist democracy. After all, from about the mid-1980s anthropological and historical studies of development have pointed towards the more oppressive aspects of development, particularly those initiated by the state. These studies of colonial and postcolonial development projects remain crucial for understanding the dynamics of the state, power, and development, also under a neo-liberal free market agenda. Instead of freedom, they argue in favour of development as a process of domination. Central to the analysis is the perpetuation of inequality through development. Several notable studies are influenced by Foucault's decentred conceptualisation of power, particularly 'governmentality' and discursive power (Abrahamsen 2004; Escobar 1991, 1995; Ferguson 1990; Robertson 1984; Kapoor 2005). These studies point out that state driven development, inspired by the theories of Milton Friedman, or otherwise, do *not* lead to freedom but actually contribute to inequality and oppression.

### **'Seeing Like a State' in Africa**

Scott's (1998) *Seeing Like a State* provides a comparative and historical analysis of large-scale state initiated social engineering projects. These 'dramas of development' range from forced villagisation in Tanzania to Soviet collectivisation. His analysis of development departs from a discursive view on power. At the same time, however, Scott reveals the inability of the state to control the outcome of development and, unlike Ferguson (1990), he does not point towards a concealed programme of increased state control through failure.

Scott argues that for a state initiated development scheme to become a 'drama', four elements are needed. The first is an ordering of society by the state in simplified schemes and structures, subordinate to more complicated local realities. In describing this process, Scott uses the term 'legibility': a coercive practice of abstraction rendering the state's subjects and domains more visible, and organised according to an administrative orderly aesthetics. The second element is what he calls 'high modern' ideology, which he described as 'a muscle bound version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress . . . and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws' (Scott 1998:4). Scott strongly stresses that high modernism is first and foremost an ideology, one that borrowed only the legitimacy of science and technology, without actually basing its practical implementation on scientific practice. Here again legibility plays an important role. Projects did not so much need *to be* efficient or modern, they had *to look* efficient and modern according to a legible structure (Scott 1998:4). 'The third element needed for total disaster

caused by development schemes is an authoritarian state that is *willing and able* to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring high modernist schemes to practice' (Scott 1998:5, our emphasis). A last and, it seems to Scott, subordinate condition is a civil society incapable of resisting these plans.

In sum, the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, high modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the levelled social terrain on which to build. (Scott 1998:5)

The key terms are, in our view, ideology and legibility. Legibility is especially important for the administration, which, it could be argued, is the 'true' goal of many a high modern project. Thompson's contribution shows the obsession the agricultural officers implementing the Native Land Husbandry Act had with the digging of field contours, leading the involved farmers to comment that they had good harvests without field contours in the past (Thompson, this issue).

With respect to the all-important notion of legibility, we contend that this is in fact the most severely lacking factor in colonial and postcolonial Africa. When it comes to its populations, but also quite often to its territory, most African states are particularly blind. The examples, historical and contemporary, of incomplete censuses, the lack of basic infrastructure, dysfunctional tax systems, postal services, cadastral services and the absence of coherent land tenure legislation abound. In all cases described here it could be argued that the state attempted to create legibility and make use of it at the same time, an observation that might hold true for more high development schemes in Africa. Although three of the projects described here were initiated and carried out by what are generally seen as the strongest states on the continent – South Africa and Southern Rhodesia – their ability to read their populations was still limited, mostly by a short sightedness in effectively predicting possible reactions.

One could argue that there is a 'Catch 22' inherent in Scott's definition of the failure of high modern development: the nature of most high modern projects is such that they cannot be successfully implemented without making victims, either by crushing resistance from an active civil society, or through the destruction of local means of existence in the creation of an aesthetic, 'modern' and legible structure. The latter is especially important in high modern projects carried out in ecologically and economically fragile areas where all local resources are used in risk balancing coping strategies (De Bruijn and Van Dijk 1995). One only needs to think of the many barrages built to improve agricultural production through controlled irrigation and provide hydro electricity (which led to forced migration); loss of arable land in the created lake and further upstream; destabilisation of existing irrigation systems; loss of fishing grounds and so on. The successful implementation of the intended project does not, therefore, improve the lives of its subjects. On the other hand, as far as high modern structures can be superimposed upon a society by the state, they can only be maintained and can

only uphold a masquerade of success by internal adaptation and a kind of informal 'improvement' by those for whom it is designed, thus corroding its originally intended structure and working. Scott recognises this inherent paradox, giving the example of work-to-rule strikes upsetting the system (Scott 1998:256). The success of the project, therefore, can only result from the deviation of the ways it was intended to improve the quality of life. In this way, Scott manages to portray high modern development as a lose-lose situation.

### **Locating power and conflict**

To some, development brings about freedom, to others it brings about oppression, but both views argue that freedom and oppression take place without major contestations and conflicts, without bloodshed, or brutality. This makes Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998) complementary to his *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). The message that is conveyed is that the dominated might protest, but these protests remain marginal and without significant effects. The dynamics of the local implementation of development, therefore, do not feature prominently in Scott's analysis of development: Apparently, for the failure or success of the project, these do not matter.

A discursive approach to power makes power, by definition, difficult to locate and this might be one of the reasons why conflict, severe social tensions, and the manipulation of diverging political and economic interests appear to dissolve. The danger of a discursive approach to power is that resistance becomes over generalised and that manipulations and complicity within bureaucracy are underestimated (Herzfield 2005). Kapferer warns against an analysis of politics and the state that has its intellectual roots in Hobbes and his warning is relevant here as well: 'For Hobbes the state is an extension of fundamental human nature. The state is peace-making by virtue of its appropriation and monopolization of the wherewithal of violence' (Kapferer 2004:65). For Africa in particular, with its ongoing humanitarian crises, it is crucial to examine struggles over belonging, authority, legitimacy, and control of the state (see Reno 1995; Hutchinson 1996; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Agier 2002; Geschiere 1997, 2004; Lecocq 2004; Bähre 2005). The dynamics of power cannot be framed within the binary of resistance versus compliance to which anthropology too often resorts. They require intensified examination (see Ortner 1995; Yang 2005).

The contributions in this issue show how crucial it is to question the power of policy papers, state bureaucracies, or 'governmentality' in general. They urge us to analyse divisions within the state as well as within communities. They reveal how crucial it is to acknowledge the fragmented, the ambiguous and ambivalent in the nexus of development, community and the state. When Li (2005) argued along similar lines, Scott (2005:400–401) responded that although local varieties and disorders do exist, these should not obscure the uniformity of change brought about by colonial, as well as neo-liberal, development: 'It may be that in observing any particular skirmish, the battlefield seems all confusing

and disorder. From a greater distance and with some hindsight, however, large patterns of change can be discerned' (Scott 2005:400).

But what if the observed 'particular' skirmish *is* in fact the large pattern, as the contributions to this issue suggest? What if these skirmishes are commonplace and at the core of development? The contributions reveal how central confusion, chaos, and ambiguity are to development. The challenge is to analyse these skirmishes as part of the large pattern of development. Only by acknowledging these will we be able to understand why development is liberating to some, oppressive to others, and many other things that do not fit in the duality oppression-resistance (contingent, confusing, chaotic, ambiguous) to a lot of other people.<sup>3</sup> Particularly in dealing with the current democratic capitalist free trade approach to development that tries to side track the state, it is crucial to cast our analysis beyond the state and its policies.

This special issue of *African Studies* highlights how important it is to examine the ways in which state driven development projects bring about violence, are prone to ambiguities and ambivalences, lead to complicity by particular local leaders or by bureaucracies with local populations, or are simply experienced as chaotic and confusing. The contributions are all inspired by Scott's analysis on the state and development and all point towards ways of understanding development that take us out of the dilemma of resistance versus compliance.

The first contribution by Leander Schneider explicitly re-examines a case featured in *Seeing Like a State*. Schneider analyses the failed villagisation that was so central to the Tanzanian post-independence project of *ujamaa*. The case reveals the power dynamics within the relatively strong socialist state of Tanzania, and that planning represented a symbolic celebration of the state's modernity. Using new materials from Tanzanian archives and policy-making institutions, Schneider urges us to move away from the view that the project failed as a result of a planned, aesthetic, Cartesian order that, in Scott's view, is central to high modernism. Moreover, the authoritarian manner in which the project was carried out caused considerable resentment among the intended benefactors. The substantial defection of villagers undermined the project, but it also undermined the effectiveness of the occasional political protest. Schneider argues that authoritarianism should not be read as a precondition to failed development, as Scott suggests. Rather, authoritarianism and its ensuing power struggles need to be at the core of analysis.

Guy Thompson's case concerns 1950s' Southern Rhodesia, a colonial state that tried to discipline people for the market by increasing their consumption as well as their productivity. Drawing on archival records, press reports, and interviews, the implementation of the ambitious Native Land Husbandry Act (NLHA) in Southern Rhodesia in the 1950s is examined in depth. The NLHA was indeed exemplary of high modernist planning in so far as it attempted to create modern, self-disciplining subjects. But this only partly explains the failure of the NLHA. Thompson reveals that at a local level the complex and conflicting

interests between urban nationalism and rural resistance were crucial to the failure of NLHA. The conflicts that emerged undermined the NLHA to the extent that the Rhodesian administration finally had to abandon it.

Based on ethnographic research in post-apartheid South Africa, Erik Bähre examines a National Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing project in Cape Town. The RDP was a state initiated development programme aimed at overcoming the inequalities of the past, empowering previously disadvantaged communities, and creating an active citizenry. Legibility was crucial to the project and contributed to its success (houses were built), as well as its failure (the violence ensuing over entitlement). Bähre reveals how a local mafia style leadership controls development by continuously exploiting the divisions within the post-apartheid state through the manipulation of insecurities brought about by elections and the emergence of new political parties. In order to comprehend the violence that development encourages, one needs to step away from a discursive view of power and instead explore the divisions within communities, and the state, both at provincial and national level.

Steven van Wolputte's contribution concerns livestock in the political economy and ecology of Namibia's northern Kunene region through most of the twentieth century. Combining colonial archive material with fieldwork, he reveals how 'natives' challenged colonial discourse and resisted colonial rule. He reveals how memories of the past influence contemporary views on development and the state. The case examines how, to the inhabitants of Kunene, cattle was crucial in their attempts at exploiting the ambiguities of apartheid, indirect rule, and modernity. 'Cracks in the colonial façade' (Van Wolputte, this issue), such as the manipulation of the rigid use of ethnic boundaries by colonial officials, opened up spaces for negotiations between colonisers and colonised. Van Wolputte criticises overarching notions of the power of the colonial state and development. He argues that modernist 'governmentality' fails to take note of the crucial role of ambiguities of the colonial encounter.

The challenge, in our view, to which these contributions point, is to incorporate conflict, ambiguity, and disorder in outwardly ordered yet dramatic development. Scott's four criteria for the failure of grand development design – the attempt to create legibility, high modern ideology, the authoritarian ruthless state, and a weak civil society – give guidance in furthering the analysis such that conflict, disorder and ambiguity are at its core. First, concerning legibility, the question that needs to be raised is: to what extent are legibility and abstraction contradictory to other policy procedures? With which forms of power and legitimacy do people and institutions manoeuvre within the contradictions that are inherent in policy? Second, how overarching is high modern ideology and what are its dynamics with other ideologies and interpretations that impede on development? Third, the coherence and inherent coercive power of an authoritarian state needs to be questioned. The state is often divided and ridden with internal power struggles that have a profound



effect on development. The state changes over time, providing new threats and opportunities with regards to wealth and power. What is the impact of such power insecurities on development, or the attempt at control by particular social groups? Finally, even if civil society is incapable of resisting development, what other responses translate grand development schemes into a local reality? The fascinating contributions from Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia reveal the numerous other reactions that, although they do not fall in the dichotomy resistance versus compliance, have a profound impact on the outcome of development that indeed is quite often dramatic.

### Notes

1. We wish to thank Peter Geschiere for his helpful comments on a previous version of this introduction.
2. Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999) argues along similar lines. For a critical review of World Bank policy, see Bello and Guttal (2006).
3. Hannerz's (1987) concept of 'creolisation', for example, enables one to focus on the ways in which development takes shape locally and look beyond state policies and the rhetoric on development.

### References

- Abrahamsen, R. 2004. 'The Power of Partnerships in Global Governance'. *Third World Quarterly* 25: 1453–1467.
- Agier, M. 2002. 'Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps'. *Ethnography* 3: 317–341.
- Bähre, E. 2005. 'How to Ignore Corruption: Reporting the Shortcomings of Development in South Africa'. *Current Anthropology* 46: 107–113, 117–120.
- Bayart, J.-F., Ellis, S. and Hibou, B. (eds). 1999. *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*. Oxford, Bloomington & Indianapolis: James Currey & Indiana University Press.
- Bello, W. and Guttal, S. 2006. 'The Limits of Reform: The Wolfensohn Era at the World Bank'. *Race and Class* 47: 68–81.
- Brett, E.A. 2003. 'Participation and Accountability in Development Management'. *The Journal of Development Studies* 40: 1–29.
- De Bruijn, M. and Van Dijk, H. 1995. *Arid Ways – Cultural Understandings of Insecurity in Fulbe Society, Central Mali*. Amsterdam: Thela Publishers.
- Escobar, A. 1991. 'Anthropology and the Development Encounter: The Making and Marketing of Development Anthropology'. *American Ethnologist* 18: 658–682.
- 1995. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Ferguson, J. 1990. *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization and Bureaucratic State Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geschiere, P. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.
- 2004. 'Ecology, Belonging and Xenophobia: The 1994 Forest Law in Cameroon and the Issue of "Community"', in H. Englund and F.B. Nyamnjoh (eds), *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Hannerz, U. 1987. 'The World in Creolisation'. *Africa* 574: 546–559.
- Herzfeld, M. 2005. 'Political Optis and the Occlusion of Intimate Knowledge'. *American Anthropologist* 107: 369–376.
- Hutchinson, S.E. 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Kapferer, B. 2004. 'State, Sovereignty, War, and Civil Violence in Emerging Global Realities'. *Social Analysis* 48: 64–72.
- Kapoor, I. 2005. 'Participatory Development, Complicity and Desire'. *Third World Quarterly* 26: 1203–1220.
- Lecocq, B. 2004. 'Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The *Teshumara* Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society'. *International Review of Social History* 49: 87–109.
- Li, T.M. 2005. 'Beyond "the State" and Failed Schemes'. *American Anthropologist* 107: 383–394.
- Manzo, K. 2003. 'Africa in the Rise of Rights-Based Development'. *Geoforum* 34: 437–456.
- Ortner, S.B. 1995. 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37: 173–193.
- Reno, W. 1995. *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robertson, A.F. 1984. *People and the State: An Anthropology of Planned Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, J.C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Every Day Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- 2005. 'Afterword to "Moral Economies, State Spaces, and Categorical Violence"'. *American Anthropologist* 107: 395–402.
- Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yang, S.-y. 2005. 'Imagining the State: An Ethnographic Study'. *Ethnography* 6: 487–516.