



Three Different Critiques of Rationalism: Friedrich Hayek, James Scott and Michael Oakeshott

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I

The rationalist imposition of doctrines from above has been regarded as a serious concern for liberalism and has also posed a general threat to human freedoms. Even though it is recognized as a threat, a substantial response to rationalist imagination is yet to be agreed upon. While two responses to rationalist plans offered by Friedrich Hayek and James Scott have been influential in certain academic circles, a closer look at these approaches exposes their limitations. It is in this context that a study of Michael Oakeshott's unique critique of rationalism gains relevance.

This chapter proposes that the comprehensive nature of Oakeshott's critique of rationalism sets it apart from other critiques of doctrinal

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rationalist thinking. Oakeshott's comprehensiveness stems from it being located in a wider philosophical understanding that is skeptical of doctrinal interventions in practical activity. Unlike Hayek's and Scott's critique of rationalism, which share an anti-doctrinal orientation but tend to become doctrinal in numerous ways, Oakeshott manages to be comprehensively anti-doctrinal by offering a critique of rationalism as a part of a wider philosophical position that separates practice from theory, science, poetry and other engagements. Oakeshott's critique of rational interventions in practical conduct is presented with the awareness that the practical worldview has limitations.

In his work *Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Paul Franco provides a comparison between Michael Oakeshott's and Hayek's ideas on rationalism, freedom and a limited state.¹ This chapter draws from the argument put forth by Franco and extends the argument to include James Scott's work, which perhaps provides a more nuanced analysis of statecraft than Friedrich Hayek's.

This approach is likely to be criticized on the grounds that these thinkers are discussing different issues—for instance, Hayek critiques “central planning” and Scott's focus is on “high modernist plans”—and hence, a comparison of the three is comparing the incomparable. Here, however, I suggest that although Hayek, Scott and Oakeshott use different terms and phrases, a common question runs across their work—the imposition of rational plans from above. All three of them, albeit differently, have argued that simplified plans are incapable of capturing the rich practical life, a practical life that is a repository of knowledge that evolves over a period of time. They share a common concern of defending the rich practical life against doctrinal thinking, and thus, it is not implausible to look at all three thinkers as responding to rationalism, even though Oakeshott is the only one among them using the term “rationalism” in his works. Hence, this chapter uses “central planning,” “high modernism” and “rationalism” interchangeably.

The chapter will first discuss central arguments found in Friedrich Hayek's and James Scott's critiques of rationalism and then argue how these critiques tend to become doctrinal. This discussion, however, will be limited to highlighting the problems that their arguments run into. The focus of this chapter will be the wider philosophical imagination employed by Oakeshott in his critique of rationalism and its uniqueness.

II—LIMITATIONS OF THE HAYEKIAN CRITIQUE OF CENTRAL PLANNING/RATIONALISM

In *The Constitution of Liberty*, as the title suggests, Friedrich Hayek focuses on the legal regime that fits well with a free market economy, while his *The Road to Serfdom* is a broadside against those who believe that political freedom and centrally planned economies can cohabitate.

In *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek makes two kinds of arguments about central planning. His first argument relates to difficulties surrounding planning complex societies. Hayek maintains that the attempt to plan complex societies from above will fail due to the unavailability of information required for executing such a plan. Human interactions involve various factors, and Hayek argues that it is impossible for one person or even a team of people to record and understand these diverse elements. He writes,

There would be no difficulty about efficient control or planning were conditions so simple that a single person or board could effectively survey all the relevant facts. It is only as the factors which have to be taken into account become so numerous that it is impossible to gain a synoptic view of them, that decentralisation becomes imperative.²

Without recording and understanding this information, planning cannot proceed and a plan based on unrepresentative information is bound to fail. In his work, Hayek tries to draw distinctions between different forms of planning. Hayek's arguments are not against all kinds of planning and he is not suggesting that human societies should flourish organically, unhindered by any conscious ordering of interactions.

There is a distinction, Hayek argues, between planning one's own individual life and planning bigger and complex societies. We usually build plans for our own lives—what occupation should one choose, how much should one spend, etc.; this kind of ordering of our lives is essential. The difference between this kind of planning of one's life and the planning of complex societies by a team or a leader from above are numerous and, for Hayek, too dangerous to be missed. Plans are often prone to failure, and while in our individual lives we would readily take up the responsibility for that failure, it is not clear how failure has to be thought about in centrally planned complex societies. Democratic elections could be one way of fixing responsibility for failure of plans

imposed from above, but Hayek believes that centralized planning would lead to corruption of democracy itself.³

The second claim that Hayek makes is that centralized planning, even if not possible, when imposed from above would require and lead to concentration of power in the hands of certain people, making its coexistence with democracy impossible. In fact, that is the central concern in Hayek's writings. The problem for him was not planning *per se*, but whether centralized planning and political and civil freedoms can coexist.⁴ Hayek argues that the only kind of planning possible in a democratic set up is one that includes a regulatory framework for individual choices. Here, planners do not inhibit individual choices but ensure that individual decisions flourish in the right kind of constitutional framework. So, decisions about production and prices are unacceptable since they distort the market-based information system, but regulations about environmental restrictions imposed beforehand on all kinds of productions, are fine.

Let's assume here that Hayek argues for allocation of resources through free market-based mechanisms as the best response to the practical needs of consumers. When the state attempts this allocation from above, through experts, it ends up distorting the market's efficient information mechanism and in the worst scenarios ends up giving state officials enormous amounts of power—a discretionary power that could pave the way to “serfdom.”

So, what kind of position does this Hayekian critique of central planning leave us with? In a Hayekian world, it is only in a free market-based system that a society could grow at its own pace and without interference from outside. Further, this free market system, from a Hayekian viewpoint, is less prone to authoritarianism. Is Hayek making a strong empirical claim about incompatibility of central planning and democratic freedoms and the compatibility of free market and democratic freedoms? Has this empirical claim been borne out? Very superficially, yes. The Soviet Union did move toward authoritarianism and the inefficient economic system did collapse there. However, many countries in the west, and countries like India, have successfully experimented with various degrees of governmental control over the economy without ever descending into full-blown authoritarianism. On the other hand, countries like China, Singapore and Vietnam have shown us that states can incorporate a high degree of market economics without embracing freedom in other domains.

The larger point here is that one cannot discover in advance, like rationalists or central planners tend to do, what kind of economic transactions will work for the different contexts. Arguing for a certain kind of empirical economic order for all contexts and cultures is akin to “a plan to resist all planning.”⁵ Rationalism ought to be repudiated with a different kind of thinking about practical activity, something that does not involve creating a blueprint for practical activities. Hayek’s work does tend to speak in the language of a blueprint, and here, it betrays its rationalist roots. A Hayekian worldview ends up celebrating a certain kind of ordering of economic activities without leaving a space for different contextual judgments about the same. A defense against authoritarianism is a laudable goal, but to assume that a free market-based mechanism will protect us against the same, in different contexts, would be a grave simplification of the complexities of practical life. In other words, I am suggesting that Hayek’s critique of central planning is limited as a critique of doctrinal rationalist thinking, for it ends up becoming a doctrine itself.

III—JAMES SCOTT’S CRITIQUE OF HIGH MODERNISM

James Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, provides a more nuanced critique of high modernism/rationalism. Instead of locating the threat to human freedoms in a specific kind of economic order, Scott’s focus is the larger ideology that pervades modern statecraft, as much in the capitalist west as in the Soviet Russia. I will argue that Scott ends up facing the same problem of trying to impose a general analysis on issues that belong to different contexts and might require varied judgments and analytical lens.

Scott’s argument is that a certain kind of high modernist thinking pervades over most of the modern statecraft. High modernist ideology finds complex practices of communities illegible and in turn attempts to make them legible for statecraft. While mostly harmless, under certain circumstances—like where civil society organizations lack the where-withal to challenge state actors—it could have disastrous consequences. Scott cites examples from different spheres to make his point.⁶

The first chapter of *Seeing Like a State* discusses modern forestry’s attempt to grow a “planned” forest, for a natural forest was unamenable to the revenue requirements. Scott argues that while “planning” forests, proponents of scientific forestry missed out on “all those trees, bushes,

and plants holding little or no potential for state revenue.” Missing from the planners’ vision “as well were those parts of trees, even revenue-bearing trees, which might have been useful to the population but whose value could not be converted into fiscal receipts.”⁷ The planners’ focus was only on productive trees useful for timber. The trees were planted in rows with regular distance maintained between them for easy management and the larger organic life of a forest was ignored. The point that Scott is trying to make is that the earlier versions of modern forestry failed to recognize the complex organic world that a forest is and viewed forests only through the lens of revenue-bearing timber. The recognition of the failure of earlier versions of modern forestry, Scott argues, was a recognition of this limited way of looking at forests.

Scott, similarly, discusses at length the limitations of the high modernist urban planning, with its emphasis on segregation between residential and commercial use areas and a fascination for wide roads and high-rise apartments. Through a discussion of Jane Jacob’s critique of Le Corbusier’s vision of a modern planned city, Scott argues that high modernist architectural plans missed out on various organic practices that make a city livable and safe. Commenting on Jane Jacob’s critique, Scott writes,

The planners conception of a city accorded neither with the actual economic and social functions of an urban area nor with (not unrelated) the individual needs of its inhabitants. Their most fundamental error was their entirely aesthetic view of order. This error drove them to the further error of rigidly segregating functions. In their eyes, mixed uses of real estate—say, stores mingled with apartments, small workshops, small restaurants, and public buildings—created a kind of visual disorder and confusion.⁸

Scott’s larger point is the same, that a city has to be viewed as complex processes that organically grow out of different kinds of interactions, and the plans that simplify these complexities end up creating urban conglomerations that are unsafe, uninspiring and fail to serve their avowed purposes. Citing the example of modern Brasilia, Scott argues that the planned Brasilia failed to appeal to the new residents because “it lacks the bustle of street life, that it has none of the busy street corners and long stretches of storefront facades that animate a sidewalk for pedestrians.”⁹

Scott makes similar arguments about forced villagisation in Tanzania and also about the modern state’s attempts to give standardized

surnames to their populations. Through all these, Scott wants to point out that states found complex practices unamenable to certain outside interests. Also, the complexity of these practices and, consequently, their usefulness was lost when they were supplanted with the planned order from above.

So far James Scott's analyses looks convincing and it does seem that the modern statecraft's attempt to simplify complex practices has led to a destruction of the contextual pragmatic knowledge. Scott then turns the same lens towards the debate on role of leadership within the Soviet Communist party. He refers to the debate between Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg on the role of Marxist intelligentsia while sympathizing with the latter's argument that a revolution cannot be directed from above by the elite leaders. It is not a disciplined party that is led from above, but the active movement with intensive grassroots involvement that could lead to the establishment of a radical progressive society. Scott's larger point again is that even a radical party will succeed in its aims only if it is built up from below.

I want to, here, suggest that Scott's discussion of the question of leadership in a revolutionary party betrays the tendency to push a defense of local and organic processes a step too far. How a movement, democratic nation, or any other kind of organization of people should be lead is a complicated question, and answering this through formulaic answers skeptical of all kinds of direction from above is akin to imposing a singular plan on different contexts and problems. The kind of leadership suitable in a context will depend on the particular conditions prevalent in that situation. Sometimes it might be prudent for a leader to lead their parties and countries in directions that might not be agreed to by everyone.

Dipankar Gupta, in *Revolution from Above*, argues that we have greatly underemphasized the role that leaders and their qualities have played in the establishment of democratic regimes. Focusing on India, Gupta writes that if the leaders of the independent movement in India had gone by the opinion of the lower workers of the party or the larger populace of the country, then we might not have succeeded in enacting a secular constitution in the first place.¹⁰ The point that I want to highlight through Gupta's work is that it is difficult to articulate a specific kind of position on the role of leadership in a party or a political movement. While Scott's larger point, which he makes through Rosa Luxemburg, on the importance of inner party democracy and engagement is well taken, it is doubtful if one can tell in advance which style

of leading a party, political movement or a nation will work in different contexts. These are, by definition, practical matters, and an attempt to give a formulaic answer to these questions starts falling on the same analytical side as that of rationalist thinking.

It should be clear that Scott nowhere suggests that he is articulating a clear position of/on what should work in different contexts, though in *Two Cheers for Anarchism* Scott does endorse an anarchist emphasis on the value of unorganized mutuality.¹¹ In most examples that Scott cites his point is well taken, though it seems difficult if one can think of the unorganized mutual order as the best solution in all the contexts. As Gupta has argued in his book, it is difficult to imagine that certain modern orders would have at all emerged through unorganized mutuality. Scott is certainly not oblivious to these problems, but it is difficult to see what kind of theoretical solutions can Scott's writings provide to someone who wants to go beyond Scott's critique.

The argument in the chapter to this point has been that both Hayek and Scott offer us analytically insightful though, in the end, limited critiques of rationalism. Both of these thinkers, Hayek more than Scott, end up advocating a certain kind of ordering of the world while critiquing rationalism. Even though framed as a critique of plans that are imposed from above, both Hayek and Scott's analysis ends up providing us, even if unintentionally, with a plan for different contexts and situations.

IV—MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF RATIONALISM

As discussed above, works of Hayek and Scott could be read as a defense of a certain ordering of practical interactions. In Hayek's work, this leads to a defense of market-based systems, while for Scott it culminates in a defense of the unorganized mutual relations emerging from below. Does Oakeshott also provide us with a defense of a particular way of ordering our interactions? A certain reading of *Rationalism in Politics* can make one believe that Oakeshott is giving a primary place to practical knowledge, knowledge that cannot be learned through principles and doctrines. *Rationalism in Politics* is certainly an attempt to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge, the *technical* and the *practical*, but one would be mistaken to consider this as Oakeshott giving primacy

to the “practical” if one places it in the context of his larger philosophy. This chapter will discuss below the wider philosophy that enables Oakeshott to critique rationalist thinking while warning us against the limitations of practical activity.

Understanding the limitations of the practical worldview remains a preoccupation throughout Oakeshott’s writings. Oakeshott argues that the practical viewpoint is a certain way of ordering our experience; the practical mode of experience is the experience arranged from the perspective of a desiring self, it is the world ordered to denote its helpfulness or obstructiveness to the purposes of a practical agent.¹² There is certainly no escape from the practical viewpoint, though there are ways of experiencing that cannot be reduced to the practical agent’s view. One can look at the same events from different perspectives. For instance, consider the example of buying a shirt at a supermarket, which Bhikhu Parekh uses in his work “The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott.”¹³ While choosing a shirt, our practical interest is in procuring the best shirt that we can buy. This is an uncomplicated practical task and we have a fairly good understanding of how to go about it. There are factors that one must consider while buying a shirt: The finances involved and whether one can afford a particular shirt; the distance of the supermarket and the time it will take to reach there and whether to go there today or tomorrow, etc.

One can also view the activity of choosing a shirt from a different perspective. One can think about the numerous things that are assumed in this process of choosing a shirt at a supermarket. One can reflect on the very idea of choice and the conditions that make choice possible, e.g., deliberation, availability of different options or a human agent who is going to do the choosing. This second kind of reflection is different from the act of choosing itself, and *vide* Oakeshott we can term this kind of reflection as “theoretical” reflection on choice. Instead of choosing, one is reflecting on what all is assumed in the activity of choosing. The product of this theoretical reflection, if one ends up taking this activity seriously, is a theory of choice.

The point to be noticed in the above example, and a point that Oakeshott makes at various places, is that there is no direct link between a theory of choice and the practical activity of choosing a shirt. The knowledge of a theory of choice will not make us better at choosing a shirt. Choosing a shirt is a practical activity, while a theory of choice

dwells upon the conditions that are assumed in choice. For a practitioner, choice is an uncomplicated idea, something we do every day, but for a theoretician, choice is an invitation to think further, a mystery to be understood further, as Oakeshott would say.

In other words, a theory of something and a practical decision to do something are completely different in nature. A practical view assumes things, uncritically, while theory reflects on what all is assumed in these activities. If a practitioner chooses to investigate the assumptions of an activity, it will necessarily take her toward a theory of that activity. Also, while practical activity is about *doing*, and its goal is to achieve something here and now, a theorist's goal is *understanding* something in its completeness. A practitioner's urgency to act necessarily impedes a theoretician's goal of achieving complete understanding of the conditions assumed in that activity. Put differently, while practice is oriented toward doing and consensus, a theorist by nature is oriented toward completeness and criticality.

Oakeshott also separates a practical worldview from other kinds of intellectual activities. Throughout his philosophical writings, history as an intellectual activity remained one of his preoccupations. For Oakeshott, by the logic of her activity an historian is always interested in the past for the past's sake, but because we live in the present and practical worldview is the most dominant perspective, the remnants of the past (a document or an object) are mostly found entangled in, what he calls, "practical-present." All the enquiries begin from the present, but an historical inquiry can only begin by first separating these remnants of the past from the practical-present. The separation of remnants from the past from practical-present requires intellectual training and effort, and though one often fails in achieving this, it remains a necessary condition of any kind of historical inquiry. The separation of practical interest from historical inquiry also bars certain kinds of observation from historical inquiry. "In 'history' no man dies too soon or by 'accident'; there are no successes, and no failures and no illegitimate children. Nothing is approved, there being no desired condition of things in relation to which approval can operate, and nothing is denounced. This past is without the moral, the political or the social structure which the practical man transfers from his present to his past."¹⁴

The other inference that Oakeshott's draws from his theory of history is that the "historical" past cannot be used for the present purposes. One can certainly draw lessons from the past, and we certainly do that

in practical activity, but this usage necessarily changes the character of the historical past. To put it in another way, there is a clear separation between history and a practical person's view of the past, and one can pursue each only while destroying the other.

Science and poetry are the other two intellectual activities that Oakeshott separated from practical activity. Scientific description of the world is the world looked at from the perspective of quantity and full communicability. While practical experience is the experience organized from the perspective of a desiring subject, scientific descriptions are devoid of any subjective viewpoint. Oakeshott explains this through an example:

If I say: 'It is a hot day', I am still making a statement about the world in relation to myself. Its reference is more extended, but the remark is unmistakably in the practical idiom. If I say: 'The thermometer on the roof of the Air Ministry stood at 90°F. at 12 noon G.M.T.' I may not have emancipated myself completely from the practical attitude, but at least I am capable of being suspected of making a statement, not about the world in relation to myself but about the world in respect of its independence of myself. And when, finally, I say: 'The boiling point of water is 100° Centigrade', I am making a statement which may be recognized to have achieved the idiom of 'science'.¹⁵

Oakeshott suggests that science, by the logic of its identity, is constituted by statements devoid of subjective markers. Science provides an "objective" account of the world, while the practical account is from the perspective of a desiring self.

Poetic response, in Oakeshott's writings, is associated with a contemplative response to images. Each "going-on" is capable of eliciting two kinds of responses. One is the response we get when what appears in front of us is probed further to reveal what does not appear immediately. This first kind of response is the explanatory response, a response common to history, science, theory and practice. Explanations in the modes of practice, history and science are pursued differently, but at some level, they are all explanatory responses. Every "going-on" is also capable of eliciting a second kind of response, which Oakeshott calls the "contemplative" response. In this second kind of response, we are not driven by the interest to explain what appears in front of us through what doesn't appear, but treat it as a mere "image." "Further, images in contemplation

are merely present; they provoke neither speculation nor inquiry about the occasion or conditions of their appearing but only delight in their having appeared.”¹⁶ Only the uninitiated would ever ask questions about the factual correctness of poetic images. The questions about fact and (non)-fact are not recognized as valid questions in the activity of poetic imagination.

The above paragraphs provide a brief account of how Oakeshott separates different kinds of intellectual activities from the practical worldview. There is another question that one needs to address, which pertains to Oakeshott’s theorization of civil association in *On Human Conduct*. Could one argue that Oakeshott was trying to present civil association as the best form of association? Oakeshott was certainly more inclined toward civil association, but to draw out a recommendation out of his theorization of civil association would go against his larger philosophy.

While theorizing *civil association* Oakeshott is reflecting on a kind of association found in the modern world, another kind of association he calls *enterprise association*. Oakeshott then describes the various conditions of a civil association, e.g., a rule of law, non-purposiveness, etc. A theory of civil association is provided here, a kind of association that already manifests itself in various practices of modern democracies. It would be difficult to argue that Oakeshott meant his theory of association as a recommendation to establish civil associations. A theory of civil association is a reflection on the conditions of civil association, a kind of association that is getting lost in larger public imagination. What one gets here, at best, is a definition and understanding of the postulates of civil association.

Let us get back to the three different critiques of rationalism that have been discussed in this chapter. The larger point that the chapter is trying to put forth is that while it is plausible to imagine what a Hayekian or a Scottian position on practical matters would be—a Hayekian would argue for a free market-based economic system and a Scottian would recommend the unorganized mutual order that emerges from below—it is difficult to imagine what an Oakeshottian position on practical matters would be. Given the fact that Oakeshott specifies and separates the practical worldview from other kinds of activities, it becomes difficult to argue for a certain kind of practical position out of Oakeshott’s writing.

A critique of rationalism requires that we should be able to point out the deleterious effects of rational plans and doctrines imposed from above, but these critiques in turn have a tendency to become plans to

criticize planning. Oakeshott's critique of rationalism is unique because while on one hand, it provides us with a critique of doctrinal interventions in practical life, on the other, it warns us against the limited practical perspective and separates theory, science, history and poetry from practical activity. An Oakeshottian agent, even if one could get over the paradox in the term itself, is certainly not the one who elevates practicality over other kinds of activities.

NOTES

1. Paul Franco, *Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
2. Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 51.
3. *Ibid.*, 59–74.
4. *Ibid.*, 91–104.
5. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1962), 21.
6. James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 3–5.
7. *Ibid.*, 12.
8. *Ibid.*, 133.
9. *Ibid.*, 126.
10. Dipankar Gupta, *Revolution from Above: India's Future and the Citizen Elite* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2013).
11. James Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
12. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 207–12.
13. Bhikhu Parekh, "Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott," *British Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 4 (1979), 489.
14. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 154.
15. *Ibid.*, 146.
16. *Ibid.*, 217.