

# The Division of Labor and Forbidden Knowledge

*I, Pencil* describes an unknowable act.

The creation of a simple pencil in a free market economy is illegible and beyond the cataloguing and understanding of any individual human or body of humans. It cannot be known, it can only be experienced. It cannot be planned, it can only be embodied. It cannot be predicted, it can only emerge. The author Leonard Read does not fully understand or contain or define it, but tells a rough story of how it proceeds.

In the Bible, King David is tempted by Satan to take a census of all his people. He does, and is punished by God for doing so.

The earliest known writings appear to be ledgers for accounting.

James C. Scott describes the emergence of government monopolies on force in a geographical area as relying on legibility. Grain harvests had to occur on known schedules, with knowable yields. Forests had to be managed in neat rows of countable trees. Governments cannot create anything, they rely on what they can take through the threat of violence. To threaten and take requires definable, containable victims.

There are all kinds of ancient stories of people or gods making known secret knowledge and the suffering and chaos that resulted.

What is it about making explicit the implicit, or visible the veiled, that is so dangerous? Why do devils and spirits tempt man with this idea, and why do rebels and freedom-fighters resist being counted?

On the surface, it seems like a warning against technology, knowledge, or community and coordination. It seems to imply a hand-to-mouth existence based entirely on whatever happens to come is better than plans and efforts and technological progress. Defining things gives us the power to work with and improve them. Is this bad?

I don't think it's a condemnation of these things. I think it's a reminder that these things emerge and exist because we are fallible. Perfect knowledge and understanding of all future events is a kind of existence we can't comprehend. Because of unknowns, we must guess and probabilistically problem solve and tinker and experiment and exchange.

Out of these tinkering and exchanges emerges a series of interconnected relationships with bits of info embodied in things like language and prices. Viewing this as perfection and attempting to freeze it, know it, and count it is an attempt to build a Tower of Babel. This is dangerous and deadly. What Hayek called the fatal conceit. The point of the division of

labor and the ongoing process of market exchange and discovery is to surprise and be surprised through continued mutually beneficial action.

To capture a free market is to kill it. It is an ongoing dance of motion, and attempts to cordon it off and capture some of its power is to stop the flow of creativity. Any power captured by stagnating this flow will corrupt.

The division of labor and free exchange create a kind of ephemeral yet very real and living knowledge that aids and spurs to action and gives life. The controlled, directed, and defined economy siphons off vestiges of that creativity and causes atrophy and death.

The more legible the market to would-be rulers, the closer it is to death.

The embodied knowledge of free and open exchange is harmonious with human's limitations and therefore maximizes our capacities. The capture of that process to own and define, contain and control it exceeds human ability and therefore reduces and destroys our capacities.

*I, Pencil* is about a kind of knowledge that can never be controlled by a guild. A life-giving kind. Census-taking and central planning and boards and permits and macroeconomic mandates are attempts at a kind of knowledge beyond the reach of man, and as such, come with warnings and promises of death.