

The Burden of Legibility

*Epistemic Labour and
the Cost of Being Known
by Institutions*

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Introduction

In the early sixteenth century, a Welshman appeared before an English court and was asked to declare his name. He responded in the Welsh patronymic fashion: "Thomas ap William ap Thomas ap Richard ap Hoel ap Evan Vaughan," a chain that located him within a lineage rather than identifying him as a fixed individual. The judge rebuked him and instructed him to abandon "the old manner," after which he adopted the surname "Moston" (Camden 1605, cited in Scott 1998).

For James C. Scott, such moments illustrate how modern states render complex local realities into simplified, comparable, and administrable forms. What the court demanded was not merely information but reformulation: the patronymic encoded genealogy and social relation, while the surname system recognised only a stable individual identity. Through censuses, cadastral surveys, and standardised surnames, authorities produce what he calls a legible social world—a world that can be seen, recorded, and governed from the centre (Scott 1998; Torpey 2000).

Yet if Scott shows what states gain through legibility, he leaves open what subjects lose in producing it. This essay introduces the concept of the burden of legibility: the cognitive, emotional, and epistemic work required to translate lived experience, or 'raw reality' into institutional categories. Throughout this essay, I use "raw reality" as a shorthand for the world as it is encountered prior to institutional capture—the context-rich, unformatted terrain of lived experience that resists easy classification.

I argue that recognition within institutions requires subjects to perform translation, credibility work, and epistemic compression, and that these labours are unevenly distributed. Compression here is not merely loss but a constraint on what can count as a reason within the institution. Expanding Scott's framework reveals that legibility is not neutral infrastructure but a site at which epistemic injustice is produced.

Figure 1:
The Epistemic Process
How knowledge is filtered from raw reality, through epistemic filters, to an outcome. This outcome creates a feedback loop, as new filters are generated from this data.

“Raw Reality”
What exists prior to and independent of institutional capture, linguistic formulation, or conceptual categorization. It's the world as it is encountered before it becomes an object of knowledge, measurement, or policy

Credibility Assessment
The judgement of whether, and to what extent, the speaker can be believed

Translation Attempt
The formatting stage - shaping what you feel, know, and are into the shapes the institution recognises: 1-10 scales for pain, intake forms, diagnoses, checkboxes

ILLEGIBLE

Epistemically illegible, concepts like scent, spirituality, tacit and relational knowledge, métis, qualia, meaning-making.
“Language/data ontologically fall short”

REQUIRES TRANSLATION

Cannot be grasped by the system in its untranslated form: “Who carries the burden of translation?”
Testimonial/Hermeneutic injustice live here as well.

LEGIBLE

Absorption into institutional record - recognition - service - inclusion

Scott's Framework and Its Proposed Extension

For Scott, legibility is the epistemic condition of modern governance: complex social realities must be transformed into simplified representations capable of circulating through administrative hierarchies. From the state's vantage point, polycentric local worlds—each saturated with tacit norms, shifting boundaries, and informal reciprocities—are opaque. Effective rule over distance requires rendering such worlds legible.

Hence the state's distinctive epistemic project: the production of thin simplifications (Scott 1998, Chs. 1–2). Grid-like cities, cadastral surveys, and standardised naming systems exemplify this epistemic rationalisation. They filter local complexity into abstract, comparable units: parcels of land, enumerated households, individual legal persons. What is achieved is not accuracy but a synoptic coherence from above—an administrative intelligibility that substitutes governability over local reality.

This simplification is not epistemically innocent. It reconstitutes the relationship between knowledge and power. Once social phenomena are reformatted into legible data, they can be aggregated, ranked, and acted upon. The census enables taxation; the surname stabilises identity for conscription and legal traceability; the cadastral map furnishes the basis for property and extraction.

State knowledge, as Torpey (2000) observes of the passport, must be standardised, comparable, aggregable, and mobile: qualities that allow information to travel without the people or places it describes. In this sense, legibility is the infrastructure of governmentality—it furnishes the cognitive architecture through which the state comprehends its subjects.

Scott's counterconcept to legibility is *mētis*: the embodied, contextual, and improvisational intelligence characteristic of local practice. *Mētis* names forms of know-how that are inseparable from the material and social environments in which they arise—peasant crop rotation, vernacular architecture, informal exchange networks.

The Mechanisms of the Burden of Legibility

The burden of legibility operates through three linked processes: translation, credibility assessment, and absorption into the institutional record.

First, legibility requires translation. Institutions rely on formalised categories, but lived experience does not arrive in those forms. Subjects must therefore reformat their experience into institutional language in order to be recognised. Chronic pain provides a clear example. Pain is inherently subjective and variable, yet clinical recognition requires patients to present it in discrete, measurable, medically relevant terms. Patients thus translate diffuse distress into what Werner and Malterud (2003) call the "professional language of symptoms." This process compresses thick lived experience into thin institutional data (Carel 2016).

What cannot be rendered in that dialect risks becoming epistemically excess. Importantly, this difficulty is not simply a case of hermeneutical injustice in Fricker's sense: patients may possess adequate concepts for their suffering. The difficulty arises because institutional recognition requires those concepts to be reformatted into its specialised grammar. Each institutional domain—medicine, taxation, welfare administration—operates through such dialects, and acquiring fluency in them becomes a form of epistemic labour.

Translation alone does not guarantee recognition. Institutional systems also police credibility. As Fricker (2007) argues, testimonial injustice arises when speakers are afforded less credibility owing to prejudice, while Dotson (2011) shows how marginalised speakers may pre-emptively modulate or truncate their testimony. Within institutional contexts, claimants and migrants often reshape their narratives to align with bureaucratic expectations of plausibility. Legibility is therefore not only a matter of format but of credibility relations structured by power.

Such knowledge resists formalisation precisely because its validity is situational. It is learnt through repetition, not rule; enacted, not encoded. Thin simplifications, by contrast, privilege transportable generality over embedded expertise.

As Scott argues (1998, Ch. 9), the administrative map cannot register what farmers know by feel, nor can the bureaucratic form capture situational nuance. Simplification thus entails epistemic erasure: knowledge that cannot travel easily is treated as if it did not exist.

Scott's analytic fortitude lies in exposing how states produce epistemic order by simplifying social complexity. Yet this very emphasis on the artefacts of legibility—maps, censuses, classifications—obscures the labour that precedes them. He charts what the state gains from simplification and what *mētis* loses under it, but not the work required for subjects to make themselves intelligible to the state in the first place. Legibility does not happen to people; it happens through them. Every census entry, tax form, and permit application presupposes a moment of translation in which lived experience is reformatted into the language of bureaucracy. Scott's framework, in short, analyses epistemic loss more extensively than epistemic labour. It is this less-examined dimension—the labour of producing legibility—that the next section begins to theorise.

Legibility, as Scott depicts it, appears as a structural property of state knowledge systems. Yet to be rendered legible is not a passive condition; it is a social achievement, achieved asymmetrically: not Fricker's hermeneutical gap (lacking collective concepts) but forced translation into pre-existing institutional dialects.

I propose the "burden of legibility" as a term for the cognitive, emotional, and epistemic work required to translate lived experience into categories institutions recognise. Administrative systems do not simply perceive citizens: they demand that citizens continually produce their own visibility. This work ranges from filling forms to shaping narratives that conform to institutional expectations.

In this respect, bureaucratic legibility parallels what policy theorists call administrative burden—the individual costs of navigating state procedures (Moynihan, Herd & Harvey 2015)—but extends it to the epistemic domain. To become intelligible to power is to engage in an asymmetrical act of translation.

Finally, when translation and credibility succeed, knowledge enters the archive and becomes institutional fact. Bowker and Star (2000) describe classification systems as "frozen decisions" about what counts as reality, while Hull (2012) shows how bureaucratic records acquire ontological authority. A diagnosis replaces the illness narrative; the checkbox becomes the public fact. When translation fails, the system records absence—"non-compliance," "medically unexplained," or "lost to follow-up." What disappears is not the experience itself but its authorised institutional form.



Documentation

Credibility

Translation

Institutionally Typical

(e.g. Native speaker, citizen, able-bodied, theoretically educated, belonging to the most researched categorie (f.e. W.E.I.R.D. etc.)

Institutionally A-Typical

(e.g. Non-native speaker, non-local nationality, differently abled, practically educated, belonging to an underresearched categorie, etc.)

Unequal Distribution of the Burden

The burden is structurally regressive: native speakers appear 'transparent' (zero translation cost) while marginalised knowers bear disproportionate labour. To translate oneself into the categories of an institution requires linguistic fluency, bureaucratic literacy, and access to documentary resources. The same simplifications that make administration efficient also make recognition easier for those already legible—native speakers, property owners, citizens—while imposing translation costs on those at the margins (Moynihan et al. 2015).

In this sense, the burden of legibility is structurally regressive. Those whose lives already conform to institutional expectations appear "transparent," while others must undertake elaborate epistemic labour merely to be recognised. Scott implicitly acknowledges this asymmetry when he notes that states are "partial to those forms of knowledge that are easiest to aggregate," yet he does not pursue its sociological gradient.

The stratified nature of legibility can be observed clearly in healthcare systems. Amat et al. (2022) report that 22.3 percent of patients were recorded as "lost to follow-up" in a major public hospital system. Predictors of this apparent disappearance included limited English proficiency, non-white identity, and reliance on public insurance. From the standpoint of medical administration, these patients vanish from view; from the standpoint of epistemic analysis, I argue, they are overburdened by translation.

Each interaction requires the patient to translate narrative into institutional categories—symptoms to codes, experience to forms—and the greater the linguistic and cultural distance, the greater the labour. Statistical absence here might be better understood as a trace of failed mutual intelligibility under asymmetric translation, not as disappearance of experience. The healthcare archive thus locks in epistemic unevenness: those lacking institutional fluency appear less real to the system.

A similar dynamic operates at the international scale. Global health and development institutions privilege epistemic forms anchored in Anglophone, quantitative, and Northern academic traditions (Bhakuni & Abimbola 2021). Knowledge produced in other idioms—oral, experiential, vernacular, or locally theorised—must undergo translation into the formats recognised by global expertise.

Those who possess the means to perform such translation—researchers at Northern institutions—accrue epistemic capital, while others remain invisible. The global knowledge economy thus mirrors the legibility regime of the nation-state: visibility comes at the cost of alignment with dominant epistemic grammars.

Bufkin (2024) argues that epistemic injustice is not merely interpersonal but infrastructural: it inheres in the material and procedural design of institutions. The burden of legibility exemplifies this structural dimension. Systems that require subjects to perform epistemic translation externalise their own costs onto those with least capacity to bear them. On this view, justice demands not only recognition of marginalised knowers but redistribution of epistemic labour itself.

Legibility and Justice

As Susan Leigh Star (1999) reminds us, infrastructure becomes visible primarily at the point of breakdown. Classification and record-keeping systems appear neutral precisely because, for those already formatted to fit them, they function smoothly and invisibly. For others, however, these same systems impose continual translation costs. The legibility apparatus thus generates a hierarchy of epistemic friction: effortless transparency for the institutionally typical, persistent opacity for the rest.

To describe a governance system as merely "informational" is therefore misleading. Infrastructures of legibility actively distribute epistemic advantage: Bowker and Star's 'frozen decisions' encode historical power, making legibility a moral geography where translation costs track axes of exclusion.

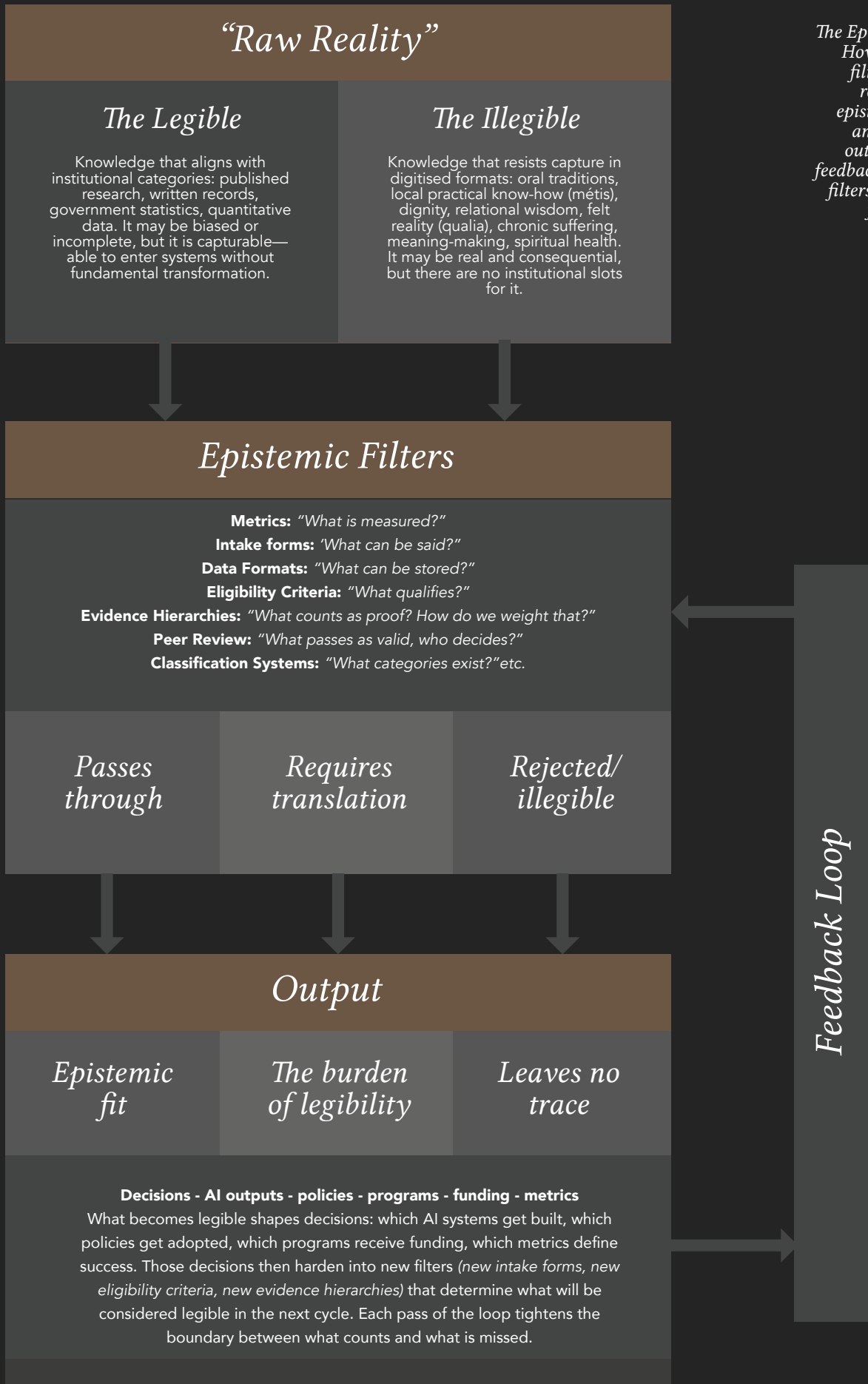


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Classification decisions are neither technical nor trivial—they sediment historical power relations into routine administrative practice. To function within a bureaucracy is to inhabit a moral geography of visibility shaped long before one enters the form.

If legibility systems structure epistemic labour, then justice must concern not only who is recognised, but who must work to be recognised. Current institutions presuppose a one-way adaptation: subjects must translate themselves into bureaucratic idioms. A more reflexive approach would reverse that asymmetry, asking institutions to cultivate responsiveness to lived forms of knowledge. This reversal is neither utopian nor abstract; it underpins existing reformist practices. Narrative medicine, for instance, treats patient storytelling not as supplementary but as epistemically primary. Participatory governance begins from local knowledge rather than seeking to codify it after the fact. Multilingual bureaucracies redesign forms and procedures to fit plural epistemic norms rather than enforcing linguistic uniformity. Each represents a modest reallocation of epistemic labour from the subject to the institution.

Legibility, then, must be recognised as a political choice about the distribution of epistemic work. To design for legibility is inevitably to decide whose way of knowing will count as the default and whose must translate. Recognising this transforms legibility from an administrative fact into a moral problem: not whether knowledge must be simplified, but to whom the labour of simplification properly belongs. If the foregoing analysis holds, then justice may require the interpretive labour demanded by institutions to be more fairly distributed rather than systematically offloaded onto those already marginalised by them.

Conclusion

When the Welshman in the English court abandoned his patronymic to adopt a surname, he did more than comply with an administrative demand: he performed a translation. What Scott saw as an act of legibility can thus also be read as an act of epistemic labour—the compelled transformation of social meaning into bureaucratic form. The cost of legibility for the Welshman was the loss of relational intelligibility, his patronymic surname.

For Scott, the episode exemplifies the state's drive to simplify. For our purposes, it illustrates the subject's work of becoming legible. Across contexts—tax registers, medical records, immigration files—this work recurs. To be seen by institutions is to reshape one's experience into their epistemic templates. The result is a governance apparatus that not only records inequalities but reproduces them at the cognitive level.

Legibility, then, is not simply a technical precondition of administration; it is a site where epistemic costs are distributed. The question, if this essay's framing is accepted, is not whether societies require legibility—modern polities surely do—but who bears the burden of producing it, and whether that burden might be more fairly distributed.

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