

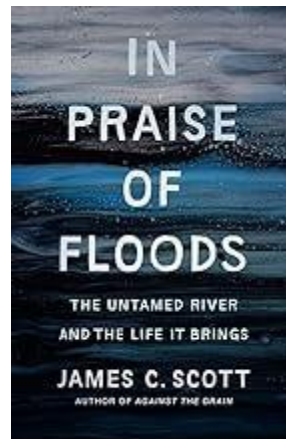
In Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life It Brings

James C. Scott

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XXIII + 221 pp.



“Floodwaters, as they move across the landscape, create a huge variety of habitats: backwaters, ponds, marshes, swamps, slow-moving warm waters, refuges from predators, and assemblages of food and habitat that favour a large variety of riverine species. At bottom, it is a story of habit and nutrition. The entire mechanism depends on the microbial richness of the floodplain, which represents the base of the food pyramid in the lifeworld of the river (pp.41-2).”

The late James C. Scott was a leading thinker about development and the relationship between the individual and the state, as well as a Southeast Asianist. He draws upon all of these domains in this, which is sadly his last book (and one that is not quite finished, as will be noted later). In his previous work, *Against the Grain* (2017), he argued persuasively against settled agriculture and how we might all be better off in a variety of ways if we were still semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers. As agriculture became established as the main form of food security, it inevitably led to the abandonment of the peripatetic life and its replacement by an existence defined by confinement in tiny spaces in which diseases, discontent and tyranny could all flourish. The act of brining the landscape into the service of humanity has not been a successful one. With *In Praise of Floods*, he approaches the subject from another direction. As the passage above explains, it is the act of flooding that brings life and renews downstream lands so that all flora and fauna can be replenished. The corollary of this, of course, is that any action that hinders this natural process diminishes the ability of nature to create and recreate what might be called the natural relations of life. In the modern world, such hindrances abound, ranging from dams to regulate the current and generate hydroelectric power to irrigation systems that slowly drain the energy from the flow of the water.

To illustrate this argument, Scott draws upon his extensive experience in Myanmar (he calls it Burma, for ‘performative’ political reasons) and, in particular, the River Ayeyarwady (also known as the Irrawaddy). He tells the story of how, as a young man, he would deflect questions from suspicious officials wondering what he was doing in the country by telling them that he was studying the river. In due course, he did study the river in some detail. In doing so, he enlists the help of researchers Naing Tun Lin and Maung Maung Oo, to whom he entrusts the task of interviewing local fishing people about

the role of *nats* – spirits, especially water spirits – in their lies and their cosmography. As Scott himself observes, no doubt with a mixture of emotions, he does not have enough time left to complete the work necessary fully to integrate the results of the research into the fabric of the book. Consequently, these histories sit on their own, like an island in the river of text, one which might seem a little strange to those who are not familiar with the folklore of Southeast Asia. In a work in which Scott permits so much of his personality to shine through, it is poignant. I might also add that, had the interviewers spent more time with the women of the fishing villages, they would have found some differences in opinion with respect to the natural world. Specifically, they dislike and fear the dolphins which the men claim assist them in their fishing (Zin & Walsh, 2019).

I have been following Scott's work, albeit somewhat behind the times at the beginning, since his *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1977), in which he very skillfully brought the reader into the mind of the eponymous protagonist and the choices that he (as the text is mostly framed) has to make. I am also familiar with and influenced by his *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2011), which everyone interested in the Southeast Asian region would benefit from reading. He was consistently able to incorporate a broad range of learning into his work with a light hand. It is not something that everyone who gets published by Yale University Press is able to do. He will be missed.

References

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