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SOJOURN Symposium

On *In Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life It Brings* by James C. Scott. Yale University Press, 2025.

Review essays by Ian G. Baird, Tun Myint and Eric Tagliacozzo.

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Review Essay I: Ian G. Baird

In Praise of Floods is the final book of James C. Scott, a distinguished political science professor at Yale University. Published a few years after his retirement, and less than a year after his death on 19 July 2024, it is but one of many important books written by Scott. While aspects of the book harken back to Scott's previous work, the book's focus is on river ecosystems, the more-than-human, and how rivers have been thoroughly altered by humans over history, topics not covered in his previous publications.

The main geographic area of focus in the book is the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy), one of Burma's most important large rivers. *In Praise of Floods* is divided into a short introduction and six substantive chapters, and an "interlude" that falls between chapters 3 and 4.

In the introduction, Scott effectively and concisely lays out the framework for the book, beginning its last paragraph with

> Rivers are 'good to think with.' For those interested in the Anthropocene and the Great Acceleration, rivers offer a striking example of the consequences of human intervention in trying to control and domesticate a natural process, the complexity and variability of which we barely understand. (p. 7)

"Rivers: Time and Motion" is the title of chapter 1. Written in accessible prose, a hallmark of Scott's writing style, the chapter is devoted to explaining the physical geography of rivers, including how rivers shift and meander across space and time. He describes how water flows are critical for rivers and emphasizes how flooding is crucial for riverine systems. In discussing the annual flood pulse that is typical for rivers, he writes, "Exposed to the vagaries of rivers, human agents have, usually in vain, attempted to calculate the degree of variation, to put confidence intervals around the uncertainty" (p. 37).

In chapter 2, which is aptly titled "In Praise of Floods", an inspiring title, Scott emphasizes the biological importance of flooding for river systems, whereby flooding "is a completely natural part of the annual cycle of any river's hydrology that has not been disrupted by human intervention" (p. 38). He also appropriately argues that "The periodic inundation of the floodplains is, in sum, the lifeworld and condition of existence of all the species that inhabit the river and dwell in its riparian zones" (p. 39). He effectively demonstrates how important the flood pulse is for the biological assemblages of species that depend on river systems. Later in the chapter, he begins to explain early human interactions with rivers.

In chapter 3, Scott explores the relationship between agriculture and rivers, arguing that "Sedentism and fixed-field agriculture, together with the population growth they sparked, marked the epochal change in humankind's relationship to the river, and the beginning of what I call the thin Anthropocene" (p. 65). He explains how gradual but important shifts in human agricultural patterns have fundamentally altered river systems through vegetation removal and efforts to simplify and control them, a process that would eventually lead to more of such intensive efforts, which he refers to as "the thick Anthropocene" (p. 65). Scott wants to engage with recent scholarly efforts to address the Anthropocene, which represents the idea that humans are now capable of altering the world in profound ways like never before (see Crutzen 2006; Hamilton et al. 2015).

Scott then inserts what he refers to as an "interlude", turning his attention away from river system dynamics and the changes brought

to them by humans over history, to introduce the Ayeyarwady River system in Myanmar (Burma) to readers. He starts by discussing the relationship of people living with the river to beliefs in spirits (*nats*), and how "spirit worship", as he refers to it, has influenced how people relate to rivers. He also introduces the nature of the Ayeyarwady Watershed, including its monsoonal seasonality and the importance of what he calls "the sediment pulse", an apt concept for thinking of riverine flows as involving more than simply water. Here, one can see strands of ideas coming from his previous work, including *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) and *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2018), both of which relate to his interest in early state formation in Southeast Asia.

Chapter 4 considers more recent and dramatic changes to river systems. He writes, "The onset of the full-blown Anthropocene and the twilight of the vernacular riverscape in the nineteenth century were marked by two world-altering events: the industrial revolution and states determined to refashion nature for the benefit of a single species" (p. 108). He then turns to considering how such processes have specifically altered the Ayeyarwady River basin. However, both Scott's advanced age and the political results of the devastating and highly unjust 2021 *coup d'état* in Myanmar prevented Scott from conducting the type of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork that he engaged with for his classical book, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985). Instead, he relies considerably on field interviews conducted by two Burmese research assistants, Maung Maung Oo and Naing Tun Lin, and the stories that emerge from their fieldwork, to provide on-the-ground accounts of how river systems, their biota, and the lives of Burmese people have gradually changed over time. These include considering how forests, important wetland habitats and life associated with them have gradually been altered and diminished. He ends the chapter by detailing the ways that various types of industrial pollution and agricultural pesticides are threatening riverine-dependent biota.

Chapter 5 engages in a topic that has not been the focus of any of Scott's previous books but has gained much attention from scholars in the soft social sciences and humanities in recent years, the so-called more-than-human. Scott also experiments with a new form of writing that departs from his previous work. He chooses a species well known to me, albeit from the Mekong River basin in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia (Baird et al. 1994), the Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*), to be the principal narrator of the chapter, although Scott intermittently gives voice to other river-dependent species, including fish, plants, molluscs, birds, turtles and otters. He concludes by making the dolphin the ambassador of all non-human life associated with the Ayeyarwady River, giving it voice by writing, "We nonhumans who have spoken demand our full rights as citizens of the watershed. We recognize that you too are riverine citizens; you desire clean water and a reliable and abundant harvest of fish as part of your subsistence. But both are in jeopardy because of what you and others of your species have been doing [to the river system]" (p. 151). I wonder if the voice that Scott gives to these species really goes beyond what Scott himself wants to say. I am also somewhat suspicious about the reasons for choosing the dolphin to represent other riverine species; did Scott hope that elevating the dolphin to this role would make its words more relatable to humans? And does choosing a charismatic marine mammal that is popular with humans, particularly Americans (see Baird and Quastel 2011), really move us far enough along on the more-than-human path? Maybe not, but it is at least a step in the right direction.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, pulls together the book's main ideas to argue that "the River's Woes are Iatrogenic". He simplifies the term for readers, in classical Scott fashion, stating that "an iatrogenic illness is one caused by previous treatment or nosocomial infections contracted in hospitals or clinics, such as the bacterial infections streptococcus, which is highly resistant to many antibiotics" (p. 176). He draws on this term to make the point that "the disasters of rivers with which we grapple today are the results of prior efforts

to discipline and domesticate rivers for the benefit of *Homo sapiens* and their nation-states" (p. 176). Here, his long-standing anarchist thought and deep suspicion of statism fully emerge, although this time in support of rivers, their dynamic flood pulse systems, and the array of human and non-human species that depend on them. The final sentence in the book, and in his illustrious career as an interdisciplinary Southeast Asianist, is telling. He writes, "If we heed the voice of the Ayeyarwady River speaking on behalf of the more-than-human world, we will have taken the first step on a more promising path" (p. 188). Indeed, he remained an activist to the end, always advocating for those who are forgotten or subjugated to the power of capital and, especially, nation-states.

I highly recommend *In Praise of Floods* because of the way Scott translates important ecological ideas into easy-to-read prose, ultimately leading to an activist message, one that I have also striven to communicate through my own work in relation to the Mekong River basin, another important and threatened river in mainland Southeast Asia (see Baird and Thorne 2023). I suspect, however, that Scott's final intervention is shorter than he had originally planned for. While I am uncertain why exactly things turned out the way they did, it seems to me that the book would have benefited from an additional chapter. Although it deals with the impacts of various types of dikes, levies and other ways of controlling rivers and floods, its treatment of the major impacts of various types of hydroelectric dams is surprisingly thin (just two pages in the final chapter). However, I know from my visit to Yale University in November 2012, during which time he invited me to present about the impacts of hydropower dam construction on fish, fisheries and people in the Mekong River basin for his political science/anthropology undergraduate seminar, and from his book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1995), that he was acutely aware of how large dams expand state power and promote high modernist pursuits, and also negatively affect the non-human life that *In Praise of Floods* vigorously defends. My suspicion is that such a chapter, which would have been a greatly appreciated

addition to an already important book, is absent simply because Scott ran out of time to write it. In any case, I have no doubt that he hoped that others would heed his call to action and continue his important work. I can only thank Jim for his efforts, and declare, in solidarity with his efforts, two cheers for floods!

Review Essay II: Tun Myint

James C. Scott and Burma/Myanmar

I first met Professor James. C. Scott at the Burma Studies Conference in 2000 hosted by Northern Illinois University. He attended the panel where I presented my paper analysing Emanuel Forehammer's Jardine Prize Essay on the sources of Burmese law written during the British colonial era in Burma. The title of my paper was "Evolution of Burmese Law and Legal Concept". After my presentation, I introduced myself to Scott and thanked him for coming to the panel. During the lunch break, Jim asked me whether there was any continuity in Burmese law between the different kingdoms, the British colonial administration and post-independent governments. I told Jim that, metaphorically speaking, a traffic roundabout model of rules, meaning an anarchic system, has long existed in Burmese society, while at the same time a traffic light model of rules—a state-governed system—was created by kings and, later, governments. These metaphors are one way of imagining how humans construct their freedoms to maintain some level of organization in their lives (see Foreword in Scott 2025). I opined that when I spoke of the evolution of Burmese law, I was referring to both models. Jim, however, was referring to the traffic light model in asking about the continuity of Burmese law. The discussion of his question opened up more questions about why we create law and order and who, between states and subjects (or governments and the governed), is ultimately served by the law. The theme of governability and ungovernability was a core feature of the propaganda purveyed by the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) under Ne Win. I grew up under such propaganda, embedded in daily socialist newspaper headlines that painted the

ethnic minorities in Burma as ungovernable rebels (*thu-bone*) who, according to the BSPP, needed to be brought into the "legal fold" of the state. Hence, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009) was a part of Scott's takeaway from Burma and Southeast Asia's minorities, who have developed state-evading strategies and enjoy living with roundabout models of rule of law.

At some point after I first met him, I asked Jim how he first became interested in Burma. He told me that during his senior year at Williams College he had to write a senior thesis to graduate. Rigorous liberal arts colleges in the United States require all students to write a senior thesis or what other places might call an "honours thesis". Jim said that by the time of his final semester he still was not sure about what to write for his senior thesis. He went frantically to see one of his professors at the economics department at Williams. Jim asked his professor to take him on as a volunteer research assistant and, in return, to let him write his senior thesis under the professor's supervision. The professor he approached was a specialist on Indonesia whose class Jim had taken in the past. Twenty-one-year-old Jim was assigned to write about Burma and its economic condition. Jim was happy that he had finally got a topic to write for his senior thesis under his professor's supervision. But as soon as he got out of that meeting at his professor's office, he asked himself, "Wait a minute, where is Burma!", and headed to the map. That was the beginning of his initial encounter with Burma, which became both a personal and a professional lifelong interest. It is profoundly fitting to say that Jim's first serious scholarly paper was on Burma, and his last book before his passing was on Burma too. In this context, readers of *In Praise of Floods* will find multiple reasons to appraise highly James C. Scott's scholarly journey and lifelong scholarly interest in Burma.

As most scholars and observers know, Burma today still endures the world's longest civil war or armed conflict at countrywide scale. That political situation amplifies the enduring struggle between the traffic light model of rule of law, which served the kings and today the state, *and* the roundabout model of rule of law that the Burmese

people of diverse backgrounds desire to be governed by. My guess is that from the outset of Scott's inquiry on the costs and benefits of state, Burma became a source of several scholarly puzzles he encountered on the role of the state in civilizations across the world and on the state's troubles in balancing order and freedoms. Scott's accumulative intellectual puzzle based on upland Southeast Asia and Burma was poignantly raised in his *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, published in 2009. The puzzle he posed was "how might we best understand the fraught dialectical relations between such projects of rule and their agents, on the one hand, and zones of relative autonomy and their inhabitants, on the other?" (p. 2). He then elaborated on page 3 of that book:

> the ubiquity of the encounter between self-governing and state-governed peoples—variously styled as the raw and the cooked,… the backward and the modern, the free and the bound, the people without history and the people with history—provides us with many possibilities for comparative triangulation. We shall take advantage of these possibilities where we can.

Scott did take advantage of those possibilities throughout his intellectual journey. From *The Moral Economy of Peasants* (1976), *Seeing Like a State* (1998), *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), and *Against the Grain* (2017), to the book under review, Scott continued to focus on this puzzle and extrapolated several additional intellectual puzzles for not only his home discipline of political science but also for diverse regions of the world and multiple academic disciplines. In my view, *In Praise of Floods* represents a celebratory lap Scott planned to take in shaping future scholars of both civilizational orders, based on roundabout *and* traffic rule models, constructed exclusively *by Homo sapiens for* and *of* themselves. There is a pitfall in thinking with a single-species perspective about *Homo sapiens*' existence and the existence of nature under their control. *In Praise of Floods* has to be read with Scott's earlier works to appreciate the style and structure of the book.

In Praise of Floods

From the introductory chapter to chapter 3, Scott first develops the idea of time scale among different species on the planet. The time scale, based not just on *Homo sapiens*' lives and their existence on the planet but on the deep history of the planet before humans emerged, is a foundational concept in framing his main point in the book. The reason is that the river needs to be treated as an "assemblage of life forms" (p. 4) that connect beyond the physical or human-mapped river and time itself. The floods of rivers are in fact responsible for bringing together the life forms on the planet. Scott writes, "biotically speaking, a river in its entirety … represents veritable corridors of life forms" (p. 5) on the planet. In that sense, rivers are everywhere because of the floods and life forms they bring to the planet.

The second idea Scott develops in the first part of the book is the idea of motion. Taking into account the "meandering" of the untamed rivers, Scott visualizes the "flow" of rivers and the motion of life and non-life forms that rivers bring to the planet (p. 31). Scott then extends his discussion to show that everything flows and is in motion; nothing is static in nature. Nature, like a river, is constantly in motion. Scott opines that the meandering and movement of the river amplify its life form to "teach us that what we take as given was not always the case and might not, therefore, always remain the case" (p. 13). That is to say, the history as we understand it and teach is not a tenable fact or subject if we take a single-species perspective of time scale. These two main ideas frame the case study of the Ayeyarwady River.

The book is structured into two main parts divided by an interlude that introduces how Scott plans to treat the Ayeyarwady River as an illustrative case for his main point in the book. In the first part of the book, the concept of time scale stretches from the perspective of *Homo sapiens* to the rest of nature along with the deep history of the planet and its inhabitants. His intention, I believe, is to warn *Homo sapiens* that thinking about academic concepts such as sustainability,

environmental governance and order based on our species' perspective alone is insufficient. Time, in this sense, is relative to species. Thus, adopting a single-species perspective of time to study history will provide a limited understanding.

The themes from *Against the Grain* are prominently emphasized in *In Praise of Floods*. The concepts of time scale, rivers in motion and flows of life enabled by floods emerge in the first part of the book. The interlude chapter devoted to introducing the Ayeyarwady to readers incorporates Scott's broader theoretical concepts elucidated in the first part of the book and his key extrapolation from the case of Ayeyarwady in the later part of the book. Scott develops two broader critical theoretical concepts: (1) the idea of all-species democracy for the entire ecosystem, in which *Homo sapiens* as late comers are "riverine citizens"; and (2) iatrogenic effects as the process of human civilizational development and its potential demise.

The book weaves concepts such as the meaning of time scale, the motion of rivers as they meander and shape the planet's surface over time, non-anthropogenic nature, thin and thick Anthropocene, and domestication. Scott argues that rivers are "good to think with" because they "offer a striking example of the consequences of human intervention in trying to control and domesticate a natural process" (p. 7). With these reasons, earlier themes about conventional civilization-making resurfaced in discussing archaeological evidence and reinforcing the argument that nearly all civilizations emerged from river basins after sendentarization was selected by hunters and gatherers. That decision by hunter-gatherers to abandon living with nature to controlling nature has been unleashing floods of ramifications across the planet. After the interlude, Scott engages more with the Ayeyarwady River and its riverine ecosystem dynamics to counter the conventional civilizational thesis of human progress.

The main focus on Ayeyarwady opens with devotion to the "riverine citizens", who include *Homo sapiens* and the spirits, or *Nats*, created by humans to structure continuity of control across generations in Burma. Spiritual and ecological system thinking is introduced by the Burmese who live along riverbanks by bringing

in the spirits of deceased humans who dwell in forests and rivers. In this sense, readers will be curious to learn more about how Burmese humanistic and spiritual thinking relates to ecosystem entities and synergy. For this review, I will focus less on the nitty-gritty details of river hydrology or dynamics of the river species and more on how Scott connects his professional and personal interest in Burma and how he carefully utilized knowledge from Burma's social and ecological dimensions to inform his audience about two critical concepts he delved into in this book. I believe that in writing this book, Scott sought to synthesize his own intellectual and personal journeys that have been devoted to going against conventional theses of social change and order under state-governed societies. The question is, *where do ideas surrounding the human ability to subdue nature originate in the long history of social change since Homo sapiens abandoned the hunter-gatherer lifestyle?* Scott perhaps would answer this question by pointing to the beginning of domestication of fire, plants and animals, which provided experiential knowledge to believe that humans can control nature. Such learning by doing led *Homo sapiens* to believe they can subdue nature, eventually culminating in the belief that they can domesticate themselves under states, and now also under the market.

The key point of this book is in chapter 5, which is the part that is most fun to read. By animating different riverine species and presenting imagined conversations between them at town hall meetings, Scott amplifies the problem of the conventional knowledge about nature that is framed through the single-species perspective of *Homo sapiens*. It is also ironic that Scott, as part of *Homo sapiens*, has to speak for riverine species to get the main point across to his fellow *Homo sapiens*. Scott views that the conventional knowledge of *Homo sapiens*, learned through Eurocentric scientific discoveries about other species and entities of the planet's ecosystems to construct terminologies and concepts *by, for, and of Homo sapiens*, is myopic in understanding *Homo sapiens*' place and existence in nature. It is myopic because it neglects the intrinsic voices of other species and often is used to subdue nature. Through such town hall

meetings of riverine species, including *Homo sapiens*, Scott calls for an ecosystem-wide political order that will be defined through "all-species riverine democracy" (p. 152) or all-species ecosystem (or ecological) democracy. Such a democracy, he supposes, may save all species from extinction or perhaps avert the untimely extinction of *Homo sapiens*.

However, Scott never asks Ayeyarwady dolphins or any other species of the river whether they have, one epoch after another, accumulated knowledge about other species and entities of the planet, or whether they would eventually want to create their version of single-species governance to make their own civilizational progress. Perhaps he assumed that such questions are muted because *Homo sapiens* are the only species who have created *wants* through the idea of progress after abandoning their hunter-gatherer lifestyles that involved taking only what they needed. The principle of gains had then replaced the principle of needs over time among *Homo sapiens*.

Perhaps the idea of time scale that Scott discusses in the early part of the book is the principle of organization in non-anthropogenic nature, where everyone comes and goes at their time scale and leaves nature without leaving control mechanisms to be used by their own species for generations to come. The civilizational and conventional thesis about social change is that we, *Homo sapiens*, have made our lives better by exercising control among us and over other species and nature. Scott challenges such a thesis in his earlier book *Against the Grain*, and again in this book.

If readers are looking for a detailed study of how social systems affect the Ayeyarwady River and how the state in Burma simplified the river's ecosystems, they will be disappointed, because Scott's central focus in this book is "to recognize the animated liveliness of the river and its tributaries" and "to give voice to all the flora and fauna" (p. 77). With this central goal in mind, Scott devotes the entirety of chapter 5 to animating all the "riverine citizens" by writing in their first-person voice, with a special focus on "nonhuman species", to illustrate and propose the idea of "all-species riverine democracy".

In the final chapter, Scott revisits the ramifications of human progress, which he deems to be similar to the phenomenon of a medical treatment that induces a new medical problem for the patient, or "iatrogenic effects". The point of referencing iatrogenic effects is that all societal progress or development tends to bring additional problems owing to such progress. For today's environmental problems, especially the anthropogenic ones, societies might be suffering from the iatrogenic effects of their progress.

Scott's final chapter explicitly deals with the idea of iatrogenic effects that he first introduced in *Seeing Like a State* (chapter 9) and later repeated in *Against the Grain*. Did *Homo sapiens* make a mistake when they abandoned the hunter-gatherer lifestyle? We shall never know the answer to this question. But Scott concludes his book with a hopeful message by opining that if we promote the idea of "all-species democracy" by listening to all other nonhuman species, we might be able to take a first step to answering this question. As Scott suggests in the closing sentence of his book, "If we heed the voice of the Ayeyarwady River speaking on behalf of the more-than-human world, we will have taken the first step on a more promising path" (p. 188). That more promising path may or may not lead us to what he called the "golden age of barbarians" in *Against the Grain*, referring to the age before *Homo sapiens* abandoned their hunter-gatherer lifestyle. At the very least, Scott seems to propose that the all-species democratic life that the natural riverine ecosystem offers us would lead to the path of taming the state, its scientific methodology and its monopoly of control over the lives of its subjects. Considering the current political climate around the world, *In Praise of Floods* urges readers to ponder three questions: (1) Why are tacit and local knowledges perceived to be inferior to Eurocentric science for governmental decision-making? (2) To what extent is standardization of data, knowledge, meaning and science a threat to the associational life of individuals in a democracy and a hindrance to conceiving "all-species-riverine democracy" in which *Homo sapiens* are one of many ecosystem citizens or riverine citizens? (3) How does the standardization of science to serve the

state and capitalist market economy contribute to a growing mistrust of governmental institutions and formal education around the world?

River's End in Burma: Eric Tagliacozzo

When the editor of *SOJOURN* kindly asked me to write a rejoinder to two commissioned review essays on Jim Scott's last book, *In Praise of Floods*, I was a bit hesitant. Surely Jim should do this? But Jim, of course, was now gone—Jim *couldn't* do this. I thought about things for a while, and agreed, but only on the condition that it was clear I was speaking for myself in my essay, and not (putatively) for Jim. The editor (again) kindly agreed. So that is what is offered here: a response to two interesting essays, and a third way of seeing Jim's last book. I spent some time alone with Jim just before he passed, helping him in his house for a few days. The last conversations we had were mostly about Burma, and especially about the Ayeyarwady River. As Tun Myint notes in his essay, Jim started and ended his academic career with Burma—more about that life confluence is explained in Tun Myint's essay in the pages of this Symposium. For me, I remember sitting unhurriedly in Jim's living room, Jim across from me, about two months before he passed. His voice was the same voice that I had known for over thirty years since coming to Yale and studying with him as part of my PhD committee; the same lilts and intonations. He was middle-aged then, and I was young; now I am middle-aged, and he is gone. Like the river he studied, things keep moving. There is no stasis. When we had our last discussions about Burma and its river, there in his Durham farmhouse, his eyes sparkled. Though his body was giving out, one could see his mind was still laser focused on what he had just written—his last contribution in a lifetime of incredible work.

So that is the first thing to emphasize: the impossibility of speaking for Jim. Scott was not a contrarian, but he was utterly himself—he saw the world differently from most people, and he made connections that few of us could hope to make. Much of this depended on his voracious reading. He never seemed to read a book

that he could not take something away from, either of value (most commonly) or something to critique (also not uncommon). He was excited by experimentation, and one can certainly see *In Praise of Floods* as partially that—for good or ill, or both—an experiment. If you had told me when I studied with Jim that he would have an Ayeyarwady dolphin speaking in the first person in one of his books, I would have shaken my head and laughed—but here we are. The dolphin is a voice for the river denizens; Jim Scott (of course) in this volume is also a voice for the same. This leap would seem odd, and maybe a little crazy, coming from most other scholars—but it is strangely *apropos* in his own case. His vision of Asia, of the past, of power relations and society's evolution has always been original, and sometimes off-kilter, at least at first glance. It has always been provocative. Always it leads towards the revelation of potential larger truths in the world we live in, and of new ways of potentially seeing, or doing, things. In this he has been extraordinarily constant. The river always reaches the sea.

Ian Baird's contribution shows us this. Moving along chapter by chapter, he gives us a cogent summary of the main ideas (and some of the details) of *In Praise of Floods*. He also points to the Scottian concern with "deep time", something (I agree) that has become more noticeable in Jim's work over the course of his career, especially in *Against the Grain* (2018) and in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), two of his last books. Jim was fascinated by history, and the possibility of other life-worlds in other eras; "the past is a foreign country" is the old dictum, and I think he believed this more and more the older he got. Already one of the most famous political scientists alive, he was drafted into a partial appointment by Yale's Anthropology Department too, eventually. This was a mark of respect given by discipline cousins that is rarely extended to all but the most accomplished academics. Why not understand and employ history too, he seemed to think—this was not avarice, but just pure interest on his part. But this was "big" History. Baird points out that Jim went along with the huge interest in the academy on the Anthropocene, though he split it in this book between the

"thin" and "thick" Anthropocene (p. 65), two different periods that marked different stages of humankind's meddling with the world around them. As Baird also points out in some gentle critique in his essay, Jim might have meant for this book to be a bit longer, before his body gave out. I had that nagging feeling too when I read it. That's not because this volume is shorter than almost all of his others, but because the book is missing discourse on a few things clearly of great interest not only to Jim but to the chosen topic of study in this book. Baird singles out dams, for example, which are a huge issue mostly in mainland Southeast Asia and in the Zomia massif he made famous in his other work.

Tun Myint's essay is more personal in nature, while also going over the main lines of the book. After detailing some of their interactions over the years, Tun Myint spends some time sketching out the "traffic light" model versus the "roundabout" model of state-civil society relationship that so fascinated Jim. These are metaphors for how human beings live in complex societies, either by the "fiat" and dictates of the state (traffic light) or by understanding why you might wish to do something, with or without the imprimatur of the regime (the roundabout). Tun Myint pleads for authors to understand this last book within the full oeuvre of Jim's work, a sentiment I am sympathetic to, as it makes sense in some ways as a closing act. It also makes sense within the time we are currently living. The second half of the book deals largely with the notion of iatrogenic ramifications for the river: by choosing to heal or "fix" certain aspects of the river's unruliness, new maladies are caused. Jim found himself in this same predicament as his body began to fail him. Many treatments were trade-offs, helping to fix one thing or another but often causing other problems in the search for a solution. It doesn't feel like an accident that this line of thought came forward in his writing just at the end of his life. He was going through some of the same things as the Ayeyarwady, and he understood the simpatico nature of their plights.

What might Jim have made of these interpretations of his last work? As I said above, I can't really say; I don't even want to

speculate. Jim certainly read reviews of his work, but he didn't seem to care overly much about critiques (and trenchant critiques are not really offered here in these pages anyway, including by me). Scott had a keen self-confidence, after all; more than most, I believe he knew his own mind. But I also think he understood that his reading and his interests were so eclectic that the results of his scholarship—especially his major books—would be by necessity "other" than what one might find in the main thoroughfares of his field. He welcomed the discussion that his ideas generated, but he was genuinely inquisitive and generous about other points of view. He made no insistence that he was right and others were wrong, and in fact one of his favourite catchphrases was about how all of us belonged to the "invisible college", the marketplace of global ideas that circulated and transformed, and eventually changed how everyone thought over time, like it or not. For Jim, truth was spelled with a small "t"; it wasn't capitalized. Similarly, "little traditions" of knowledge were every bit as important to him as the "great traditions" of scholarship. This was a standpoint again in confluence with his Burmese river, whose actors he saw as human, but also as "more than human", with neither category of river denizens being more important or worthy of study (or respect) than the other.

I was never involved in the genesis of this book. This is different from the writing of *The Art of Not Being Governed*, when he sent me the book in manuscript and I sent him back a twenty-five-page critique, feeling that I owed him every last drop of my effort for all that he had taught me at different times in my life. My only contribution to *In Praise of Floods* was to discuss the book's cover with him after some samples had come back, and the manuscript itself was already with Yale University Press. (Jim asked me to look at five covers and asked which one was best, and I chose one; Jim being Jim went his own way and settled on a different one. Scott being Scott to the end!) It is an eerie book, I think—not in a bad way, but in the strange sort of "familiar unfamiliarity" of its spirit. He is listening to the river—not just to the Burmese who live alongside it and who are depending on it, but to *everyone* in the

river, the non-humans very much included. Dolphins, fish, plants, microbes; even (or maybe especially) the sediment, the life-giving and life-destroying sediment that tumbles downstream. It's both very much akin to and nothing like all his other writing. And that was Jim: a man possessed of a singular vision who nevertheless wrote a corpus of books both alike and unalike anything else that has ever been written. We will miss him.

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