

Rivers: Nature and Politics

Fall Term 2012

Political Science 420a

Anthropology 406a

Instructor: James C. Scott

Seminar

Wednesdays: 3:30-5:20

Rivers, on a long view, are living things. They are born; they die; they are occasionally maimed or even murdered; they move both gradually and violently, they teem (usually) with life. Historically, they, along with seacoasts were the main arteries of commerce, of social connection, of cultural influence. They provided and silt and hence the alluvial soils on which all the great grain-based states were founded.

Control over navigable waterways has been a source of political power. Many early states were strategically situated at the confluence of two rivers or at the choke-point of an estuary. States have in turn endeavored to engineer, retrofit, and manage rivers to their advantage in order to stimulate commerce, to irrigate agricultural land, to drain swampy land, to generate electricity. And here is the crux. The seemingly infinite complexities and flux of rivers has frequently frustrated the efforts of the state to manage or tame them to its advantage. It is this interaction between a desire to control—and thus render inert—a natural process and its recalcitrant and unpredictable behavior that (partly) defies mapping and prediction that will preoccupy us. **Thus, the dilemma of the political control of the natural world is our ultimate quarry.**

We begin, with some exemplary studies of rivers that are historically deep and “good to think with”. We explore the relation between natural systems and the human means of technical and political management. By the fourth week of the term, students in the seminar will have selected a particular river to examine closely. By the sixth week, a proposal for a research paper relating a theme of the seminar to a particular river, swamp, wetland, estuary....will be due. Students are expected to acquire a basic understanding of the geo-morphology, demography, hydrology and social and commercial history of the river they are studying.

Your instructor is something of a novice to this topic. Hopefully his enthusiasm and your own astute insights will make up for this deficit.

Vigorous participation in organizing discussion is required of all.

I have designed the course to be very demanding of your attention and thought. There will be a research paper that will count heavily toward your grade. At least twice during the term, you will be responsible for helping to organize discussion with other classmates. In addition, I want this to be an **oral**-intensive seminar in the following way. You must be prepared each week to be called upon to make a 10-15 minute analysis, critique, appreciation [not a summary!] of the readings assigned. I will call on students by name (chosen at random) and would prefer that you not read verbatim from a text but speak with notes. Recognizing that you may have other responsibilities (!) you may ask twice, no later than 6pm the night before class, to be excused from this responsibility for the next day's seminar. The goal is not to sow terror but to improve your skills at oral presentation and argument.

There is a huge literature on rivers, wetlands, water control, environmental politics, dams, and the science, sociology, and struggle swirling around them. By the second week, I'll suggest a number of possible avenues for further research. Whichever of these literatures you choose to plunge into, you'll find the water warm and the swimming good. An expanded list of relevant books is appended to the syllabus.

Many of the books assigned can also be purchased through abebooks.com, which is a network of bookstores, often for less than the postage. The books are available for purchase at the Yale Book Store and many are available as an electronic resource through the library

August 29 Week 1 Introduction to the Seminar

September 5 Week 2 The Mississippi and the Rhine

John McPhee. 1990. *The Control of Nature*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. (Part 1 on the Mississippi)

Mark Cioc. 2002. *The Rhine: An Eco-biography, 1815-2000*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

September 12 Week 3 Engineering Nature

James Scott. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (Ch. 1, 2, 9, 10)

James Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (Ch. 2, 3)

September 19 Week 4 The Columbia

Richard White. 1996. *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Hill and Wang.

September 26 Week 5 Non-homo Sapiens Vital Interests

James Prosek, *Eels* (New York:2010, Harper)

or

Anders Halverson, *An Entirely Synthetic Fish: How Rainbow Trout Beguiled America and Overran the World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

October 3 Week 6 Engineering Rivers: China

Lyman P. van Slyke 1988. *Yangtze: Nature, History, and the River*. Stanford: Stanford Alumni Association.

Mark Elvin. 2004. *Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*. New Haven, Yale University Press. Ch. 6 and 7.

October 10 Week 7 Engineering Rivers

David Blackbourn. 2007. *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany*. New York: W.W. Norton. Ch. 1-5.

October 17 Week 8 Drainage, Irrigation, and Dams

Rohan D'Souza. 2006. *Drowned and Damned: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Amita Baviskar. 1995. *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

October Recess

October 31 Week 9 Dams Again

Patrick McCully. 1996. *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*. London: Zed Books.

November 7 Week 10 Zen, Banditry, and the Art of Piloting

Mark Twain. 1997. *Life on the Mississippi*. Many versions, e.g., New American Library.

Something on the social and political ecology of swamps, fens - perhaps the Chinese Classic, *The Water Margin Novel* (Two Volumes Bound into one). 1981. Shih Nai-An. Translator J.H. Jackson. Singapore: Graham Brash and Commercial Press, 1976.

November 14 Week 11 Floods

John M. Barry. 1997. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*. New York: Simon and Schuster

Thanksgiving Break

November 28 Week 12 Do Non-Humans and Natural Objects have Rights?

Christopher D. Stone. 1975. *Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*. New York: Avon Books. (Other editions available)

Roderick Nash. 1989. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Pp. 3-86.

December 5 Week 13

Half of week 13 reserved to topics to be determined by discussion, with time for student research reports.

Perhaps readings on “dead “rivers, such as the Los Angeles River, or the Colorado, which, most of the year, never reaches the sea.

Perhaps “river politics” such as the “clean-up” of the Hudson River or the Narmada, India protests