

Mark Bomford

*Mark Bomford: Reflections on James C. Scott and
the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University*

The Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2018

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Mark Bomford

Abstract

Mark Bomford is the director of the Yale Sustainable Food Program. Prior to his arrival at YSFP, he was the founding director of the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at the University of British Columbia, where he launched an interdisciplinary program and a thriving 60-acre teaching and research farm on campus. In this interview, Bomford discusses the history of the Yale Sustainable Food Project and its transformation into a university program; James C. Scott and YSFP; the interaction and collaboration between the Agrarian Studies Program and YSFP; and the importance of Agrarian Studies in the discussion of food politics on campus.

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Project history

By Todd Holmes
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Berkeley, California

Since its inception in 1953, the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley has been responsible for compiling one of the largest and most widely used oral history collections in the country. The interviewees within this vast collection include many of the nation's high-profile citizens, ranging from senators and governors to artists, actors, and industrialists. And standing among this distinguished list is an equally impressive group of scholars. As a research unit based at UC Berkeley, the Oral History Center (OHC) has long gained rare access to the academy and ultimately built one of the richest oral history collections on higher education and intellectual history. Interviews with Nobel laureates and university presidents fill this collection, as do those with leading scientists and pioneering faculty of color. In recent years, the OHC has sought to further expand this interview collection with ambitious projects on University of Chicago economists and the founding generation of Chicana/o studies. Thus, a project on the famed Yale University political scientist, James C. Scott, and his equally renowned Program in Agrarian Studies stood as an obvious choice in these efforts and a fitting addition to the Bancroft collection. The result was the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, a two-part series featuring the life history of Jim Scott and short interviews with nearly twenty affiliates of the Yale Agrarian Studies Program.

Part I of the series, "James C. Scott: Agrarian Studies and Over 50 Years of Pioneering Work in the Social Sciences," was released in September 2020, marking Jim's final year at Yale and the thirtieth year of the Program in Agrarian Studies. This collection of interviews with program affiliates represents Part II of the project, aptly titled, "Reflections on James C. Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program." Here affiliates relate their experience with Jim and the program, helping to document the history and impact of Agrarian Studies, as well as offer future generations a glimpse at the scholar who shaped it. As Scott himself described their approach:

This is a sort of sermon I give actually, which is, you know how the health food people say, "You are what you eat"? Well, you are what you read. And if we can encourage students to read things broadly in several disciplines bearing on their interests, and force them, as we do in the Agrarian Studies Program, to make sense across disciplinary boundaries and leave behind their esoteric vocabularies of their own little discipline; if you're reading across disciplines, if you have friends across disciplines, you're going to be an interdisciplinary scholar. . . . So, you are what you read and you are who your intellectual companions are, and if we can change that . . . we can at least make a step toward real interdisciplinary work.

For the last three decades, this interdisciplinary spirit has made the rooms of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University one of the most exciting intellectual ecosystems in the academy. For both the humanities and social sciences, the program has served as a haven for heterodoxy, where casting aside boundaries and going against the grain not only proved to be the norm but a rite of passage. Officially founded by Jim Scott and collaborators in the fall of 1991,

the program brought a critical and interdisciplinary lens to the everyday experience of rural societies. With the world as its intellectual playground and the sweep of history as its scope, the Program in Agrarian Studies became *the* place for cutting-edge research. Anthropologists, historians, and political scientists filled the rooms of the weekly colloquium, as did sociologists, activists, and real-life farmers. The topics of discussion stood just as diverse. From peasant revolts in France and ancient Roman cuisine to dam-building in India and the industrial foodways of American agribusiness, nearly any topic of interest found a place within the big tent of Agrarian Studies. Few could have realized in the fall of 1991 that the newly minted program would not only last thirty years but also come to shape over two generations of scholarship and redefine the notion of interdisciplinary work.

The interviews included in this volume take stock of the program's history and achievements. They discuss how the team-taught graduate seminar, Agrarian Societies, proved the springboard for the program when first offered in 1990. The unprecedented student turnout for the course revealed an unfeigned appetite for such topics to Jim and collaborating faculty. To this day, the course continues to consistently boast the largest student enrollment of any graduate seminar at Yale. The interviews also offer highlights of the program's renowned Friday colloquium, a weekly forum that for over three decades has hosted leading scholars from around the world. Here cutting-edge research is presented to the group in a format that would become as famed as the program's founder. Unlike the typical academic lecture series, presenters at Agrarian Studies were asked to pre-circulate their papers, and after a brief framing and introduction, sit silently while the group discussed. After an hour, the author would then be "ungagged" and join the discussion, directing their responses to whatever they deemed most interesting and relevant. To be sure, it was a format that fostered vibrant intellectual exchange, one that often proved to be fruitful for authors and attendees alike. In his oral history, Jim Scott recounts how his adoption of the colloquium format was based on the Women's Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin, where he taught between 1967 and 1976. And if imitation is the best flattery, it should be noted that it was a format well-copied by other colloquia and programs around the world.

As the interviews in this volume also attest, Agrarian Studies was more than just a seminar and colloquium; it was an intellectual community. From Friday lunches to evening potlucks at his farm, Jim Scott understood the bonds that could be built over a good meal and conversation. He not only built this understanding into the program but would also generously open his home to guests and affiliates throughout the year. Longtime affiliates such as Bob Harms, Helen Siu, Michael Dove, Peter Purdue, and Paul Freedman (just to name a few) also played vital roles in the Agrarian Studies community, creating an environment of friendship that transcended disciplines, generations, and one's academic ranking. So too did the program's ever-growing family of postdoctoral fellows. Cared for by program coordinator—and designated "mother hen"—Kay Mansfield, the fellows created a new group of scholars-in-residence each year that offered both a freshness and stability to the program. This fraternity of *Agraristas* also added to the program's diverse and cosmopolitan nature, with the list of fellows representing nearly 40 countries.

Moreover, it is hoped that these interviews with affiliates provide some measure of the program's impact. In the university environment, where academic programs come and go with the changing seasons of disciplinary trends, Agrarian Studies celebrating thirty years of operation is a clear

testament to its continued contribution and importance. These interviews help bring such attributes into clearer focus, as affiliates detail the program's influence on their own work and careers. In some cases, they even discuss efforts to replicate Agrarian Studies in one form or another at their home institutions. Above all, many affiliates offer their observations on the success of Agrarian Studies, namely how a program on rural societies has remained adaptable, relevant, and popular in an ever-changing academic environment. To do so for a decade is an achievement; to do so for thirty years is nothing short of remarkable.

As a graduate student at Yale, I had the privilege of working for the Agrarian Studies Program for four years. That experience left an indelible mark on me, both intellectually and professionally. It also inspired the idea of using oral history to document and capture intellectual history. Reading the works of James C. Scott is much different than having Jim Scott discuss the aims and struggles of writing those works. Thus, the same could be said for capturing the history and importance of programs like Agrarian Studies. I hope the interviews conducted for the project do justice to that intended goal.

Interview 1: September 24, 2018

01-00:00:03

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 24, 2018. I have the pleasure of sitting down with Mark Bomford here at the Agrarian Studies Office at Yale University. Mark is the director of the Yale Sustainable Food Program. Mark, thank you for sitting down with me to talk about the Agrarian Studies Program, and relatedly the Yale Sustainable Food Program—I know there has been a lot of collaboration over the years. Well, to start, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to Yale?

01-00:00:49

Bomford:

Okay. Nice small question. I come from more of an agricultural background, I think, than the students that I work with at Yale College today. I was raised in curious circumstances up in the North Peace region of British Columbia in Canada. There are agriculturally productive areas there to the north of the Peace River that enjoy almost twenty hours of sunlight in the winter, and so you've got a very, very short, intense growing season, and you can actually pull sweet corn off of some of the valley bottom there, which is, as far as I know, about as far north as you can do that kind of thing.

My father actually had purchased one of the very last land grants, or one of the last remnants of the Dominion Lands Acts. This, of course, is relevant to a lot of Jim's [James C. Scott] work. The surveyors in London had inscribed a grid over the Dominion of Canada in the early part of the twentieth century, and this particular grid was on Treaty Eight lands—lands that were basically inhabited by mostly Beaver [settler term for Dunne-za people and language group] but also the Moberly band [West Moberly First Nations], some of the other First Nations that are grouped under Treaty Eight designation. The inscription was on the classic sectional grid, so basically these mile-by-mile squares further divided into sections and quarter sections and so forth, completely regardless of what the territory was, they inscribed that grid on top of it. My dad picked up one of those, and that was my early experience with agriculture.

It was actually an almost uniformly negative experience. My associations with farming, and in that part of the world and growing up, are basically of guns, bears, fire, poverty, and stress. When I eventually went on to postsecondary education—upon recollection, I think actually the last grade of high school that I technically completed was grade eight—but when I went on to postsecondary education after a little bit of a gap there, I wanted to be as far away from farming as I possibly could, and I went into physics. Then I got disillusioned with the sciences, and all the baggage that came along with them, rebelled, and went into English, and philosophy, and visual art. This was possible because of the Canadian tuition structure which I think enabled me to take a full course load for something like \$300 per semester, which

meant that you could stay in school for a long time. I did stay in school for a long time, undergraduate, about eleven years of it, but it was always mixed with various schemes, both nonprofit and for profit.

The way that I got involved with Yale—and curiously enough, I did not know what Yale University was or know what the Ivy League was until asking my mom a question watching *Dead Poets Society*, I think at about age thirteen or age fourteen, where they reference the Ivy League. At that point, I had no idea what it was about. Actually, one of my uncles—my dad's family, they were always loggers, basically, in the Pacific Northwest—when I told my uncle that I had got a job offer at Yale, he had given me a sort of look of consolation, saying, "It's okay. Something better will come up." Yale was a ghost town in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. It didn't even have a stoplight as far as I know. If you went to work at Yale, things were pretty bad, [laughs] in his mind.

The reason why I actually gave it consideration is, I had spent ten years at the University of British Columbia. I had gone there kind of on a bit of a harebrained scheme. The campus on Point Grey in Vancouver, owned by UBC, still had a remnant of agricultural land, a remnant of that early campus. It was founded with an agricultural faculty right from the beginning, and the last bits and pieces of the research that was taking place on this university farmland on campus had disappeared just because of the skyrocketing real estate values in Vancouver. The development arm at the University of British Columbia had made some speculative calculations that said that that campus farmland could be worth close to half a billion dollars. Because I believed what one of my wise soil science professors taught me, which is that land is worth what we say it's worth, I decided that we could say that this university farmland was worth more than the half a billion dollars in condominium development that they had proposed for it, and what ensued was a nearly ten-year-long political fight.

This political effort though was ultimately successful, and it meant that we had to amend the provincial legislation, take it to the legislative buildings in Victoria and change the University [Act, RSBC 1996 c. 468] so that we could do a density transfer, and basically move toward higher density residential development on campus to spare the more extensive use of this basically sixty acres of farm and forest. The political fight wouldn't have been possible unless we actually had a viable research center running on the site, and the only way we could attract researchers was to bring in research funding. No foundation would touch us with a ten-foot pole, because the university had announced its intent to put market housing on this land. And so, the only way to raise funds was the way that I already should have known was stupid, which was to start up a working farm operation to try and bring those fields back into production, to introduce a mix of crops which, if marketed directly to the emerging foodie class in Vancouver, would actually bring in enough of a stable income that we could start to offer incentives for researchers. To be able to kind of say, "This

place is now academically rigorous and globally significant," and to the university justify its retention and its protection.

So when you put all this together, it's kind of an improbable story, and I think that improbable story caught the attention of the [Yale] hiring committee, and they decided that this guy probably knew a thing or two about running a farm in a way that followed an academic mission, and was able to kind of hit the right political profile within this kind of academic institutional context. So, they offered me the position, which was not something I was expecting. And, six years later, here I am, and I'm enjoying it immensely. It's been a terrific program to work with. The students and the colleagues here are exceptional, and I get to walk around with these cards that say I'm the director of the Yale Sustainable Food Program, and students call me "Professor," and yeah, grade eight is still the last grade that I actually graduated from. So, that makes it a kind of improbable story, I know, but here I am, so that's how I came to Yale.

01-00:08:57

Holmes:

Oh, that's fantastic. All right, tell us a little bit about the Yale Sustainable Food Program, and the farm that's over here off of Edwards Street.

01-00:09:05

Bomford:

Sure. So, back in 2002, 2003, thereabouts, there was a confluence of student interests, faculty sympathy, and external funding that launched this thing called the Yale Sustainable Food Project. It started less as being about production and almost entirely as being about consumption. It started as a reform in the dining hall, and because Yale University has its residential college dining system. Its residential college system makes it a good place to experiment and try pilot projects, that kind of thing. So, the mix of students demanding better food, sympathetic faculty, and anonymous donation of something like \$800,000, all landed at the same time, and the administration put it to the people who were then called "masters" at the residential colleges, asking them, "Do you want to have a completely reformed, even revolutionized menu?" One of the instigators behind this was the famous chef Alice Waters from Chez Panisse in Berkeley. Her daughter, Fanny, was currently enrolled as an undergraduate at Yale at Timothy Dwight Residential College. The master at Timothy Dwight actually went the democratic route, asked the students, "Do you want food inspired by Chez Panisse?" The students said, "Hell no," because they wisely wanted to stay away from the kind of tofu, brown rice, hippie shit. And so they went to the next college where the master, John Rogers, who was a renowned Milton scholar out of Berkeley Residential College, said, "Chez Panisse food? Absolutely." And so, unilaterally, and unbeknownst to the student interests, all of this wonderful kind of Chez Panisse-inspired menu turned up in their dining hall.

To say that it was popular was an understatement. Students were forging identification papers. They had to put security detail at the door, and there was a kind of dating strategy that was circulating among Yale undergraduates who

quickly realized that if they could date somebody in Berkeley, they could get the good food. I don't know how many relationships were destroyed as a result of this, but it was enough of a success that the university said, "Okay, this sustainable food project, it may be a viable proposition." And one of the co-directors, the first of the co-directors who was brought in, a recent Harvard graduate, Josh Viertel, launched this proposal to actually start up a teaching farm, up on Edwards Street. They evaluated a couple places and kind of landed more out of serendipity on Edwards Street: it just happened to be available. It happened to be an area that no one cared about much, according to our records.

So in 2004, they broke ground on an Eliot Coleman-inspired, mixed vegetable garden using a lot of passive season extension through high tunnels. That trucked along with a very kind of student-driven, can-do attitude. It was not really formally recognized within the university planning process, as it's not like they went through a master plan or got building permits or anything like that. When you read some of Josh Viertel's statements about the origins of it, there are some bits and pieces that right now are just mind-boggling. He writes with great enthusiasm about the fact that all you need to do is look like you know what you're doing, and a bunch of students can show up with chainsaws and machetes, and as long as they look like they have knowledge and the right intention, they can basically start cutting down trees on a Yale University property. That of course is a situation that would only apply to students like Josh Viertel—almost anybody else in the world who was not like Josh Viertel would quickly be arrested and may still be in jail. So, you do have this sort of mix of a DIY [Do It Yourself] attitude, mixed with what in retrospect just appears to be jaw-droppingly naïve entitlement. [laughs]

So, that's how it got started, which works out well for us today. The dining hall experiment, as it chugged along, attracted enough positive attention that in 2007, the university agreed to a general plan to take all of these things that were sort of achieved in Berkeley, and extend that to every single meal served at Yale. They took a politically bold step in that they terminated their contract with Aramark early. So this was a third-party service provider that actually had a multiyear food service contract for Yale and they cut that short, paid the legal fees to do so, and brought in a new executive director from Stanford: Rafi Taherian. He was charged with the mission of creating a new food services institution that would be completely internal to Yale, a self-op. This would be something that would be by Yale for Yale, and he was told to take everything that worked so well, all of those principles of sustainability that we saw in Berkeley College, and to apply that to every meal served on campus.

Shortly after he was given this charge, my understanding is that the value of Yale's endowment dropped by something like \$4 billion in about a month, and it somewhat constrained this vision of being able to replicate all of this Chez Panisse food across campus. It also introduced the fundamental paradox which is unresolved any time someone talks about scaling sustainability, or

refuses to sort of consider a non-scalable solution—that is maybe the smallness is actually an inherent quality of a particular practice that gives it the qualities that you like, and gives it the things that students are going to be drawn to. And so, if you say, "Scale this; repeat it," obviously, once you take the small and scale it, it is no longer small, and if that is something that is actually inherent to the quality and value in there, then you've lost it, and it's kind of a mathematical impossibility.

So, on the one hand, you could argue that, well, Rafi was given a mathematical impossibility. He was asked basically to embiggen the small, which you can't do. On the other hand, you could say, well, the Berkeley Dining Hall experiment, if you're as honest as you can be with the math, it may have been about double the cost on a per-meal basis, as what was happening in the other dining halls. So, it became a financial impossibility in light of the crash, but it's also retrospectively brought up questions about the idea, certainly in critical food studies, that the accusations of elitism are the Achilles' heel of anything that proponents might want to call a food movement. And so, in that situation, is Yale the ally that you want if you are trying to defend yourself against claims of elitism? Do you want Yale University on your side?

There was an early version of the YSFP website—I think the thing I did the second day I showed up at Yale was take this off the website—which was the frequently asked questions section. The first of the questions was: "Is sustainable food elitist?" and answer: "No," period, with a brief explanation. Of course, this is a yale.edu website, so it's basically, "Yes, Yale University confirms, sustainable food is not elitist." It's a "let them eat" situational irony [type of statement]. The origins of the YSFP are full of such contradictions, and since my arrival, it's kind of been a six-year period of reflection and revision, and trying to take something which was a bit improbable, definitely naïve, probably entitled, and trying to make it make some sense within what I see as the context which affects a more representative view of the world at large than Yale University specifically.

One of the main things that we did early on was say, "We have to drop the assumption that what we are doing here is somehow a model or a blueprint." I kind of take to heart Miguel Altieri's axiom for agroecology, which is "principles, not recipes," the idea that we are trying to work towards a vision which is un-blueprint-able, which is unscalable. And so one of the first things we want to do when students come to the farm is say, "This is not a model farm. This is not a blueprint. We are trying to create a space here which is of this particular context, and should only be considered within this context. We're not trying to teach Connecticut farmers how to farm." This was an aspiration early on. We are just trying to be as responsive as possible to the changing student interests, to basically engage the students who have sort of a passing or a deep passion for food and agriculture, and figure out kind of how to make that interest catch fire.

The long-term niche that I've tried to put all of our programming in, is an understanding that the graduates from Yale College are very disproportionately placed in unlikely positions of power that have considerable influence, not just on the ways that we grow and eat in the United States, but the ways that we grow and eat around the world. I remind the Yale law students that three out of the last five farm bills were signed by Yale graduates. But there's more than that, when you look at the financialization of food and ask, "How proportionately are our Yale College graduates represented on Wall Street? How proportionately are they represented or misrepresented in Goldman Sachs and McKinsey, in all of these firms that are very much tied into the business of trying to financialize agriculture, and also in our patterns of consumption around the world?" And so, I'm looking for those connections. I'm trying to sort of be a bit of a specialist in identifying the Yale College students who are on that particular path, and working with them to, I guess, make visible the connections that they are about to have to the world of agriculture and the world of food, and trying to think about strategies to basically enact those connections in ways that are different than they have been enacted historically, mostly, just out of sheer ignorance.

And so it's this question of sort of trying to figure out, where is Yale's niche? How do we play to our strengths, and what is it that we actually can reform? Because the University of British Columbia where I was for ten years was more of a conventional agricultural school, it gave me a little bit of perspective on the opportunities and the inertia and the politics of working within a US land grant and a more conventional agricultural institution. So, much of what's been guiding me in the reforms of the YSFP have been, what can the land grants not do? What are the things that you can't do at a land grant that we can do at Yale? So it's this whole bundle of trying to find niche, rejecting the presumption that we know what's best, but also focusing really carefully and critically on where Yale's graduates do have significant impacts on all of these larger systemic and structural pieces that we're looking at, and how can we kind of stealthily make reforms using our three pillars now, which are on the farm, in the classroom, and around the world? That's kind of how we group together the Yale Sustainable Food Program.

Back in 2014, we celebrated our tenth anniversary—and it was a larger-than-usual value of ten, I suppose, because we started in 2003—but we kind of used it a little bit as a fork in the road, and quickly afterwards, pursued the change from project to program. What this basically means is time-bound, pilot initiative, which is sort of what "project" signifies, to permanent, ongoing, initiative activity of the university, which is what "program" signifies. So we were able to make that change. More importantly, we were able to get out of the financial services arm of the university, which is where the YSFP started, just because of the marriage of convenience. It happened that the kind of business and finance arm of the university ran dining services, the YSFP started up as a dining reform, and so there it sat until we were able

to make the move, and we made the move into Yale College, which makes a lot of sense given this idea that it's actually in the college that you have these graduates who are doing things that are significant in food that the land grants can't necessarily make reforms under.

And then the third thing—which is still in progress, and the one which might be most related to Agrarian Studies—is that we have been trying to reposition our program as something which is directly academic as opposed to being extracurricular or cocurricular or only peripherally academic. We want our activities to have very tight connections with the kind of currency that this university has academically, which is basically, I say credit or citation. So, we want everything we plant on the farm, we want everything we do, every meeting, we have to have some non-tenuous connection to either credit in a calendar course, or some kind of citation down the line, and this is basically because I would like to be able for the Sustainable Food Program to say the word "sustainable" and keep a straight face.

01-00:25:22

Holmes:

Mark, what a wonderful story, and as one who's spent six years of his life here, I've never heard the full story of the Yale Farm, so that's wonderful. I'd like to get your thoughts and have you discuss Agrarian Studies a bit, and maybe start off with how did you first meet Jim Scott?

01-00:25:44

Bomford:

So, I did one interview prior to the job offer and one interview after the job offer. The first one was a kind of standard, couple days of interviews, a lot of coffee, a lot of stress, and a lot of being on all the time, many handshakes and smiles. The second one was kind of reversed and it wasn't something that I had ever experienced before, which was basically, Yale knew that they wanted me to come here and were trying to make this seem like an enticing place to move. Coming from Vancouver, British Columbia, to New Haven, Connecticut, the cultural mythology is that that's a little bit of a hard sell to get someone to come from one to the other, and so, they were trying to make this seem like the coolest place in the world. One of their enticements was, "Let's go out to Jim Scott's farm and hang out with Jim Scott." Because my only academic background was, as I've alluded to, physics, the various agricultural sciences, especially agronomy and soil science, smatterings of English, philosophy, visual arts. Peasant studies was not something that was in my vocabulary, and Jim Scott's fame was not something that was on my radar. It was kind of like my complete ignorance of Yale University: I was ignorant of Jim Scott.

So we went out there, and I didn't appreciate this whole setup where they were trying to say, "Hey, come out here and meet a famous professor." I didn't know I was meeting a famous professor. So, that was my introduction. It was June of 2011, and my wife, Samara Brock, and I went out to Durham, Connecticut, and met Jim, and completely naively asked things like, "So

what's your writing about?" [laughs] We walked around the farm, tried to avoid ticks, and the whole thing looked pretty scrappy to me, and I'm not sure I entirely knew what to make of it, from the perspective of trying to run a farm as a profitable market operation. Jim Scott's farm did not look like much, but had a good chat, and I was told that this was someone who the YSFP could trust; basically, that Jim was a good confidante, especially when it came to matters of internal institutional politics, and that he would be honest. And so, I appreciated that greatly.

Sometime in between that first visit and my arrival in November, I learned who Jim Scott was, and I learned that he was kind of a big deal, and since that point, I've learned more about how he's kind of a big deal. My whole introduction to not only peasant studies, but also political ecology, to rural sociology—UBC did not have a rural sociology department—to even anthropology. I had minor brushes with anthropologists, no brushes with political scientists at UBC, and most of the time when UBC featured a political scientist, it was like to comment on the result of an election in Canada. And so, I was completely unfamiliar with any of the language, was completely unfamiliar with any of the canon, I suppose.

One of the reasons I've really enjoyed attending Agrarian Studies is because I've kind of used it to piggyback onto a very informal education in those disciplines that were completely new to me when I arrived, and particularly within political ecology, that was completely opened up to me. I had no idea that such a field existed before coming here, and also within human geography. These are the areas that now I have at least a basic conversant fluency in, and it's the area where I think about an academic future. These are the areas that I want to go in, and none of this would have happened if it were not for Jim Scott, if it were not for Agrarian Studies. I also got to say that reading Jim's books, especially early on, was a mind-blowing experience for me. It was also a little bit disappointing, because some of the things that I thought were original thoughts that I had conceived of independently were things that Jim Scott had written about in a much more articulate form ten years earlier. And so from that perspective, it was a kind of "aw, shucks."

01-00:30:50

Holmes:

I wanted to ask in regards to Jim—and it's something that I experienced myself as one gets to know Jim the person, not just Jim the writer and scholar—his books have become canons, a series of very significant works in the field, and yet when you look at the back bio, it says, "The Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale," but then he always has them add in there: "He is also a mediocre farmer and sheep breeder." What are your thoughts on that? If we went by stereotypes, there's not many scholars of that stature that also have that type of humility and personality.

01-00:31:58
Bomford:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's a gift which is appreciated. I've got nothing but admiration for his humility, as well as, I think, his very well-founded cynicism. [laughter] If you're in the midst of a racket, if you are kind of at the top of the heap in that academic racket, it means that he's able to speak truth to power. And he does, which I think says a lot about his ethical integrity to be able to be up front and honest about what he sees within the internal politics of academia, among other things.

01-00:35:12
Holmes:

I'd like to hear from your experience—discuss how Agrarian Studies and the YSFP became involved and started to collaborate.

01-00:35:47
Bomford:

Sure. So, my understanding is that when the Yale Farm was just getting going, Jim extended some invitations to the directors Josh Viertel and Melina Shannon-DiPietro, to speak at an Agrarian Studies colloquium, to share some updates about the vision and the progress of the YSFP at that time. He also had Josh and Melina speak in his Agrarian Societies course that was jointly listed, I think, with the college and with the graduate school. So that was a tremendous boost for the profile of the YSFP, because that is some power that he has. If you are Jim Scott, giving some initiative at Yale your anointment bestows on it a level of credibility that it otherwise wouldn't have, and especially for something which superficially looked pretty naïve—because in many senses it was—that was a really, really important boost to have that kind of acceptance.

Now, one thing I've never spoken directly to Jim about, and I hope to before too much time passes, is specifically what it was about the early Sustainable Food Project that gained his attention and apparent admiration. If you look at most of the recent scholars, say everyone in the last ten years who has been part of the colloquium, I think the majority of them would actually take a rather critical view of the YSFP, especially the early YSFP, the kind of entanglements with privilege. There was a sense, this idea that Yale would be a source of expert knowledge, and especially for someone like Jim, to see a recent Harvard grad who had spent two months in Italy with sheep or something like that coming to Yale and announcing, maybe between the lines, with the creation of the Yale Farm, "Hey, we've got something here which is better than all of the *metis* of you multigenerational Connecticut farmers." Pretty bold, and probably wouldn't be treated with the utmost sympathy if it were brought forward in a colloquium.

So one theory I have is just that it was counter-hegemonic, it was creating a kind of contradictory practice. It was taking the students from the rarified rituals of Yale College pedagogy and sort of just throwing that out the window rather unceremoniously, and saying, "Come here. Plant carrots. Harvest carrots. Bake bread. Do all this kind of stuff." So it could've just been

the fact that it looked like, "Oh, they're sticking it to the man; I'm down with that." So, that's one possibility.

The other possibility is kind of borne out by an attempt, I think in 2008, to actually merge Agrarian Studies and the Yale Sustainable Food Project into some kind of new center or institute for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment. That institute would basically use the YSFP's growing popularity with the undergraduates, Agrarian Studies' long kind of pedigree with the PhD students and the postdocs and so forth, and sort of combine it into something of a more comprehensive Yale Ag and Food powerhouse. That proposal came to the provost about the same time as the economy crashed, so it was nonetheless a nonstarter. But looking at the language in the proposal, which I think was largely Shivi's [K. Sivaramakrishnan] with clear touches of Jim, there was a larger, strategic vision that went well-beyond just the idea that the YSFP was counter-hegemonic, and Jim Scott would be down with anything that gets the heads of Yale students out of their asses and on to the farm. There was a clear idea that this could actually be part of something that Yale could leave its mark beyond the successes of Agrarian Studies, that basically it could be Agrarian Studies plus and then some. He did have a conversation with Rick Levin, the president of Yale at the time, saying, "This could be your thing. This, if you do it right, will be the thing that you will be remembered for," and I don't doubt that.

If you look at what happened within the United States from the period 2005 to 2015, if you look at the cultural capital that food and agriculture, the changes in how that was deployed, I do think that if Yale had put resources into combining practice and theory—the more liberal arts focus of the YSFP and the more postgraduate scholarship of Agrarian Studies—if you had put those together into a coherent package with an interesting narrative, I do think that it would've drawn a lot of admiring eyes to what Yale was doing. I do think that it would have been viewed very, very sympathetically by the country and by schools around the world.

So, I think that was a hugely missed opportunity and one that Jim probably identified was a possibility. I have not lost that vision, but I haven't spoken too clearly with Jim about where this might go, because I arrived in the first year of the era of financial smoothing, which was basically the first year the budget office had kind of picked up the rubble of the crash, and had given these basically austerity policies to all the units across Yale. And so, everyone's been playing defensive. We've just emerged from that financial smoothing era, and now there is much more talk of going back on the offensive, and thinking about creation rather than thinking about just defending what you've got. So, in that sort of post-smoothing era, I haven't had a chance to sit down and say, "Can we think about making this so much richer than it was in the past?" I know that Jim has been pleased with holding onto little bits and pieces of what he's had after so much was taken away, and I've been pleased with the kind of increments that we've made, but it's been very much, on both

of our sides, kind of like a bottom-up incremental, one step at a time, and there hasn't been the appetite at the senior levels for the more visionary pieces of combining these efforts to turn into some kind of larger narrative.

So, who knows? I see ten years ago a glimmer of that in Jim, but I also know that he has affinity for the kind of DIY, the kind of independent units that can hold on to their identity with integrity, and how something which is distinct within an institution, can be able to maintain some kind of counter-hegemonic presence. As discussed back with the successes of dining: if part of being counter-hegemonic and part of thinking in a way like Jim thinks is not subsuming yourself to grand strategies to combine and streamline and optimize, then maybe there are actually strengths to the distinctive, complementary separation of identities that we've got today. So I don't know what his opinion would be on that today, but it's an interesting question.

01-00:45:10

Holmes:

I know Agrarian Studies and the YSFP have collaborated on a few different events and things. Discuss some of those, and give us some examples of how that collaboration has worked out during your time.

01-00:45:28

Bomford:

So, we kind of pop in and out of the colloquium, and Jim has very kindly asked me to be the discussant for I think three or four guests of the colloquium through the years. I have really enjoyed this, and then just the involvement when the guests are invited to the colloquium, to be able to hang out with them, engage in conversation, whether it's just through the dinners that are associated with the colloquium, or through the lunches and follow-up meetings. That continues to be a sort of day-by-day, ongoing, low-level collaboration, which is still very valuable for all of us, I think. The bigger things have mostly been collaboration on conferences, and I think the largest of them was a Food Sovereignty Conference back in 2013. If I remember correctly, that was September 2013. Yeah, because we went out to Miya's [Sushi] with Raj Patel on my birthday, which is in September. That conference had the most of participation of the YSFP in terms of staff and money.

So, that was kind of the largest one, and one of the reasons why we were keen on jumping into the fray of that particular conference is because it was also in the lead up to the ten-year anniversary for the YSFP, which I had identified as a perfect breakpoint to signal to the university that we're not part of dining anymore, that's not our thing, and to put the YSFP on a new trajectory of longer-term-focused academic plan rather than the kind of more peripheral, co-curricular, dining reform piece. So, there was a whole bunch of things that were mobilizing. Jim and Shivi had sent out invitations to all the stars of rural sociology and peasant studies, and they had been, of course, mostly received with a "yes, absolutely, I'll come here." There was also this group of students in the Forestry School who were incredibly well organized—I haven't seen

that level of organization since—who wanted to do a Yale Food System Symposium, wanting to advance this narrative that there was some kind of exciting, more unified food presence at Yale. So I thought we need to start talking between these initiatives that are happening.

So I think we may have called it "The Fall of Food," or something like that, and we did all this joint marketing which was basically to frame the Food Sovereignty Conference with the Yale Food System Symposium and with this whole speaker series in our existing Chewing the Fat lineup. And so, it was a wonderful carnival of students in all disciplines at every level just loving the politics of possibility of food and agriculture, and it ended up being like the perfect lead-in to this anniversary, which was also a little bit of political theater for the purposes of repositioning what the YSFP is and where it could go.

So that was probably the largest one, and those were ones where the YSFP was kind of down into the very unglamorous work of making sure that the audio visual, and the right number of plates were at dinner service, and all of these kind of things, just the logistics to make sure that the event was well received, that people were well fed, that the right people were in the right place at the right time, and that it was captured for posterity, and a lot of that kind of work. And I think it worked out quite successfully. We came away from that conference I think very energized, and I'm looking forward to actually meeting with Jim and Shivi about something in 2019. We're just trying to get everybody in the same place at the same time to make that conversation happen.

I never would have been so bold as to venture themes back in 2013, but right now, I'm really interested in how the kind of, I guess the various political philosophies of Silicon Valley are engaging in a new process of enclosure, that has been investigated in some other sectors as questions of data ethics: the use of algorithms and prison sentencing, or mortgage approvals, or this kind of thing. But the same processes are happening in how food and agriculture is unfolding right now—who gains capital, who gains credit, who gains land rights. I'm very interested in exploring basically the data enclosures, the computational enclosures, coming out of Silicon Valley right now, and seeing if some of the scholarly history that Agrarian Studies and peasant studies can bring to this, can provide a bit of an analytic frame to make sense of it. So much of what's happening right now with the Silicon Valley political vision, it's sort of like a re-jigging of all the enclosures of the past that Jim and friends have got the analytic frames to understand, and so that's what I'm interested in talking about next.

01-00:52:36
Holmes:

If we look at Agrarian Studies when it was formed in the 1990s, it largely centered around agrarian issues and the peasantry. Other topics such as the state, development, and the environment also started to shift into there. By the

time the program celebrated its ten-year anniversary, such discussions broadened further to include food politics. I'd like to hear your thoughts on how the program helped give another venue for the YSFP students and undergraduates to hear these kind of discussions on food politics.

01-00:54:15
Bomford:

Right. So, in asking the question, "What can Yale do that the land grants cannot?" a spotlight kind of moves towards the social sciences and humanities, and it asks, "What happens when students in environmental studies, or in the graduate school in forestry and environment studies, kind of attempt to leap with both feet into the natural science framing that inscribes itself on top of issues of sustainability in food and farming?" You might call it ecogovernmentality, and you might say that Yale is the place where we are creating a group of people who are going to go on as chief sustainability officers for large, vertically integrated agri-food firms, and so forth, and basically be firm believers in material determinism—metrics on greenhouse gas emissions, or land use efficiency, or feed conversion efficiency, life cycle assessments.

And so, if you're asking what can Yale do to not exacerbate the problem, it would be by applying critical social science and humanities frames, and that's what Agrarian Studies is doing. It is introducing students to these critical framings that basically say, "Hang on, there's more to it. This is not all there is, and if you go forth believing that this is all there is, then these are the ways in which you can make life so much worse." [laughs] So it's the place where Yale is doing what it should be doing, offering a place to pause, to think long term, because it's also the question of: Where is the niche of a private university that has been around since before this country, relative to all of the froth in the private sector, and all of the turnover, and nonsense in the federal-level public sector? That is the kind of time scales and spatial scales that Agrarian Studies deals with.

So they are providing an introduction to thinking a little bit more bigly, thinking a little bit more critically, and they are then providing the analytic tools. They're providing the works that frame these analytic tools, introducing students to the kind of contemporary scholarship on the idea, how these ideas are changing and morphing, how methods are shifting, and most importantly, I think, bringing people back into the whole system, which is somewhat important when you're talking about food and agriculture. [laughs] So, it's can we re-center consideration of the human and can we somehow do our best to diligently refuse all these Cartesian divides that still linger, especially in the natural sciences? Because that's where the positive attention is allowing Yale students today, I think, to just sort of come in and accelerate these ideas in a way that doesn't end up just being very classical fetishization.

So, yeah, I think it's just a way of saying, "Thank God for Agrarian Studies," because it is a stable presence where we know that the critical questions are

going to be asked, and part of it is the presence of Jim Scott. I think it gives people a trust and confidence that they're not going to show up to Agrarian Studies one day and say, "Oh, this is now all about, how do we get people to stop eating meat? [to solve global warming]" It's not going to be swayed by the superficial arguments, the simplification. So, in that way, it's something of a refuge and a little bit of a rock. You know that if you go to Agrarian Studies that people are going to be asking the deeper questions, and that they take that charge seriously, and so, that's why having it there gives us something to point our students at all levels towards, and sort of saying like, "Okay, you're passionate about this, but be careful about accepting at face value the easy answers. If you want to go further, here's where you go."

01-00:59:45

Holmes:

What kind of impact have you seen? What kind of impact has Agrarian Studies had on the Yale Sustainable Food Program?

01-01:00:06

Bomford:

Well, it's changed us entirely, because as I said, when I came here, I didn't know anything about the scholarship that Jim was into or the Agrarian Studies Program was into, at all, and so if, in the absence of Agrarian Studies, I may have been comfortable just kind of staying exactly the same course that the YSFP had been on before. And there are many programs that imitate the YSFP at other institutions that have remained so constrained by being considered as just a dining hall reform, and I don't think anyone would be happy if we were in that situation. I certainly wouldn't be happy if my job was to be the arbiter of whether or not the purchasing decisions of Yale Dining were sustainable or not sustainable, giving them a stamp of approval. And I certainly wouldn't be happy if the message was that the path to sustainability was a supply chain reform.

And so by basically helping me out of that miserable trajectory, Agrarian Studies has I think given me the confidence that the YSFP can be something completely different and it can be so much cooler than it was when it started, or on the most logical trajectory that would have kept it, basically, as a kind of sustainability reform within the very unreconstructed finance and business office wing of Yale University. Now we get to actually ask incredibly interesting questions, and it's like the world has been opened, and that's been to the benefit of not just me, but also to every student who has come to the YSFP. I do think that the YSFP, in its early years, took students who may have had a messiah complex and just stoked it, and in some cases, that hasn't worked to the advantage of especially cultural divisions in food and farming in America. Now we are no longer doing that, and our students are sometimes coming to us with a messiah complex, and then they come back, saying with immense gratitude, "Thank you for opening up this whole world; I had no idea." Just great expressions of gratitude, saying that "this is so much better in all of its complex contradictory weirdness than it was when I was feeling like

all we needed to do was get more people cooking produce from their backyard garden, and the rest of the world would be okay."

01-01:03:09

Holmes: Well Mark, thanks so much for taking the time to sit down with me today.

01-01:03:12

Bomford: Thank you.

[End of Interview]