

Michael R. Dove

*Michael Dove: 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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Michael R. Dove

Abstract

Michael R. Dove is the Margaret K. Musser Professor of Social Ecology in the School of the Environment at Yale University. He is also a professor of anthropology and curator of anthropology at Yale's Peabody Museum. Prior to joining the faculty at Yale in 1997, he was a senior fellow and affiliated faculty member of the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii and among the first cohort of Agrarian Studies Postdoctoral Fellows in 1991. In this interview, Dove discusses his interaction with the Agrarian Studies Program over the years; its impact on him in all facets of his scholarly work; the unparalleled role of James C. Scott in the social sciences; and the importance of Agrarian Studies at Yale over the last three decades and into the future.

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Project history

By Todd Holmes
November 25, 2020
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

01-00:00:00

Holmes:

This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 24, 2018. I have the pleasure to sit down with Professor Michael R. Dove here at Yale University. And we are holding our interview here in the Agrarian Studies office. Michael, thanks so much for taking the time to sit down with me today. Why don't we start with you telling us a little bit about yourself and how you came here to Yale?

01-00:00:35

Dove:

So, I think as I've told you, I did my graduate work at Stanford [University] with Southeast Asianists, all of whom venerated Hal Conklin, who was here at Yale until he passed away fairly recently. So, I visited Yale periodically to see Hal. Even though I grew up as a Connecticut native, coming here to see Hal was my introduction to Yale and through Hal, Jim Scott [James C. Scott]. Of course, I, as a Southeast Asianist, had been deeply influenced by *Moral Economy of The Peasant*. When Jim started his Agrarian Studies program, I applied as a fellow. And I was actually in the first cohort of postdoctoral fellows in 1991.

The material that I worked on then eventually became a book that I published with Yale University Press in Jim's series, the first of a couple of books that I published in his series. And I'm hoping to have another one soon. So I was here as a post-doc, and then I kept in touch with Jim, and he supported my application for a professorship in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, which I took up in 1997.

Over the course of time that I've known Jim, he's published an amazing succession of books—*The Moral Economy of the Peasant; Weapons of the Weak; Domination and the Arts of Resistance; Seeing Like a State; The Art of Not Being Governed*. Some of *The Art of Not Being Governed* came out of the Agrarian Studies class, "Agrarian Societies." After I came to Yale, I co-taught that with Jim and colleagues for nine years in a row. And I read a draft of *Art of Not Being Governed* for Jim.

Many of us are one-book wonders. But each of Jim's books was an important book, and they were all different. The titles have entered into the everyday speech of academics. *Seeing Like a State*, there are now books and films—*Seeing Like a Tree*, etc. It will probably get into the OED [Oxford English Dictionary] if it isn't already. *Weapons of the Weak*, likewise. An unusual record, an unusual ability to switch attention and just capture something unique about one topic after another. You could kind of see that in his field work fairly late in life. He switched essentially from Southeast Asia to South Asia, or is that not quite true? Anyway, he switched from Malaysia to Burma, and learned Burmese, which was impressive. A lot of us at his age are looking

for field sites near home, going to Britain or Switzerland or somewhere comfy.

Back to the Agrarian Societies course, it's a team-taught course. It's also famous for being a tough course, not simply for the students but for the co-teachers. You're co-teaching with Jim, and you have to be on your game. Often in discussion sections you're with Jim, so you're with "Mr. Peasant Studies." It's a little bit like a comprehensive exam for entrance to a doctoral program. It's extremely stimulating, but you have to be very much on your game.

I remember once sitting in one of our classes, next to Jim. One of our co-teachers was teaching, and Jim and I were listening. We're all going to contribute that day, and Jim is going next. While our colleague is talking, Jim puts away the lecture that he's prepared and starts writing a new one, line by line, as he's listening to the person talk, because our co-teacher is giving him this new idea. So, in the space of forty-five minutes, he writes a new lecture, then gets up and gives it, which was an amazing thing to behold. And it was a wonderful lecture!

Much of Jim's work I use in my own lectures. For example, in *Seeing Like a State*, there's a great chapter on metis, everyday knowledge, that I use every fall in my lectures. I've also drawn on it in my own publications. It's a simple little insight that as you dig into it, it just gets richer and richer and has roots really thousands of years old in Western civilization.

You spoke about being at Jim's for the weekend. I don't know if you ever heard this story. For one of his dinners for the Agrarian Studies crowd, when Kay Mansfield was still with the program, the two of them spot a turkey in one of Jim's fields. Jim gets out his shotgun, shoots the turkey, and gives it to Kay. Kay plucks it, and it goes in the oven for the meal they're making for the group.

For social scientists around the world in my circles, who study agrarian society, environmental anthropology, a host of allied fields, the Agrarian Studies Program is the crown jewel of Yale. There's nothing that's done here that brings more credit to Yale, credit which has not necessarily always been recognized with resources from the Yale administration. Their support varies, and I don't think some of them recognize how important the Agrarian Studies Program has been to Yale for the past several decades.

The colloquium—the whole idea of gagging the visiting speaker for an hour—the whole structure of the colloquium, has been emulated all over the world. And for many of us, it is the best colloquium on campus.

01-00:12:34

Holmes:

Thank you Michael, that's fantastic. What do you see as the key to the success of Agrarian Studies? When we think of a program within academia, for a program to last nearly thirty years and keep going strong, that's very rare. New graduate students always coming in, a vibrant community of faculty and post-docs well-established and growing. In what you've seen over the years, what do you think are the ingredients of success for the program?

01-00:13:21

Dove:

Well, it's Jim. It's his energy. And it's his incredible ongoing record of scholarship that enables him to constitute this center of activity. If he had published nothing after *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, it might be a different story. But it's that ongoing record of scholarship that excites people, really, that gives him the standing to keep doing what he's doing.

01-00:14:24

Holmes:

How has the program impacted you as a scholar?

01-00:14:30

Dove:

Well, good heavens. The post-doc that I did gave me my best book to date. Co-teaching the course changed the way I thought about teaching. The colloquium gave me my own ideas in my own programs here at Yale on how to take advantage of visiting scholars. And then, just substantively, it's profoundly impacted my research and teaching on agrarian societies. For me, over almost three decades, all of the inputs from scholars doing cutting-edge work in the field, interacting with them under Jim's watchful eye, has had an immeasurable impact.

01-00:16:31

Holmes:

Within academic circles, you're certainly well-traveled and well-experienced. And you've probably seen a number of programs and centers in your academic career. You discussed a little bit of the colloquium's uniqueness in its structure. If we think about the colloquium in the program itself, what do you think makes it so unique in comparison to other programs?

01-00:17:10

Dove:

An abiding multi-year interest in participation by a group of faculty and students is certainly one element. It gives it almost a flavor of a family. So that's one thing. Another thing is that each colloquium is not separate and different. There are links. So in some sense, it's an ongoing conversation that has been going on for decades. That's important. And that's also unusual. Also the people who come to the colloquium are the best.

01-00:19:10

Holmes:

You were mentioning Jim's track record of scholarship. And as a much younger scholar, I also share the view that if you look at the line of succession of the works that he's produced, just one of those could be the capstone to someone's career. And here's someone who has put out about seven or eight.

01-00:19:35

Dove: Exactly!

01-00:19:38

Holmes: When you read his bio on his later books, however, I think you also get a glimpse of that unique personality of Jim Scott, as the bio-line not only states that he's the Sterling Professor of Political Science and Anthropology, but that he also prefers the title of mediocre farmer and sheep breeder. What do you think that says about the character of Jim and what he inspires in the people around him?

01-00:20:13

Dove: Well, I don't know how mediocre a sheep farmer he is. I don't know if you know this, but there was a time when Jim was shearing his sheep and giving the wool to a weaver who made blankets out of it. I actually have a Jim Scott wool blanket, and it's a heck of a blanket. It's a great blanket. I sleep under it every winter.

01-00:20:57

Holmes: I know we're almost out of time here, Michael. What are your hopes for the program in the future?

01-00:21:14

Dove: I like what happens in programs with some historical depth and continuity and tradition. In my own case, I've done what I could here to shield and protect various programs from the roving eye of administration accountants. So, my dearest wish for Agrarian Studies would be that someone is having an interview in fifty years asking people for an update on how the program is doing. Its subject matter, although attention to it waxes and wanes, will not go away. Its niche here at Yale will remain a niche that needs to be filled. So, I hope we all keep fighting for its perseverance.

01-00:22:57

Holmes: Well, Michael, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today. Are there any final thoughts that you'd like to share?

01-00:23:08

Dove: I gave a three-hour lecture this morning, so I think the bin is empty. But if I think of a great sign-off line, I will email it to you. How's that?

01-00:23:22

Holmes: That sounds great. Thanks so much.

[End of Interview]