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Paul Freedman

Paul Freedman: 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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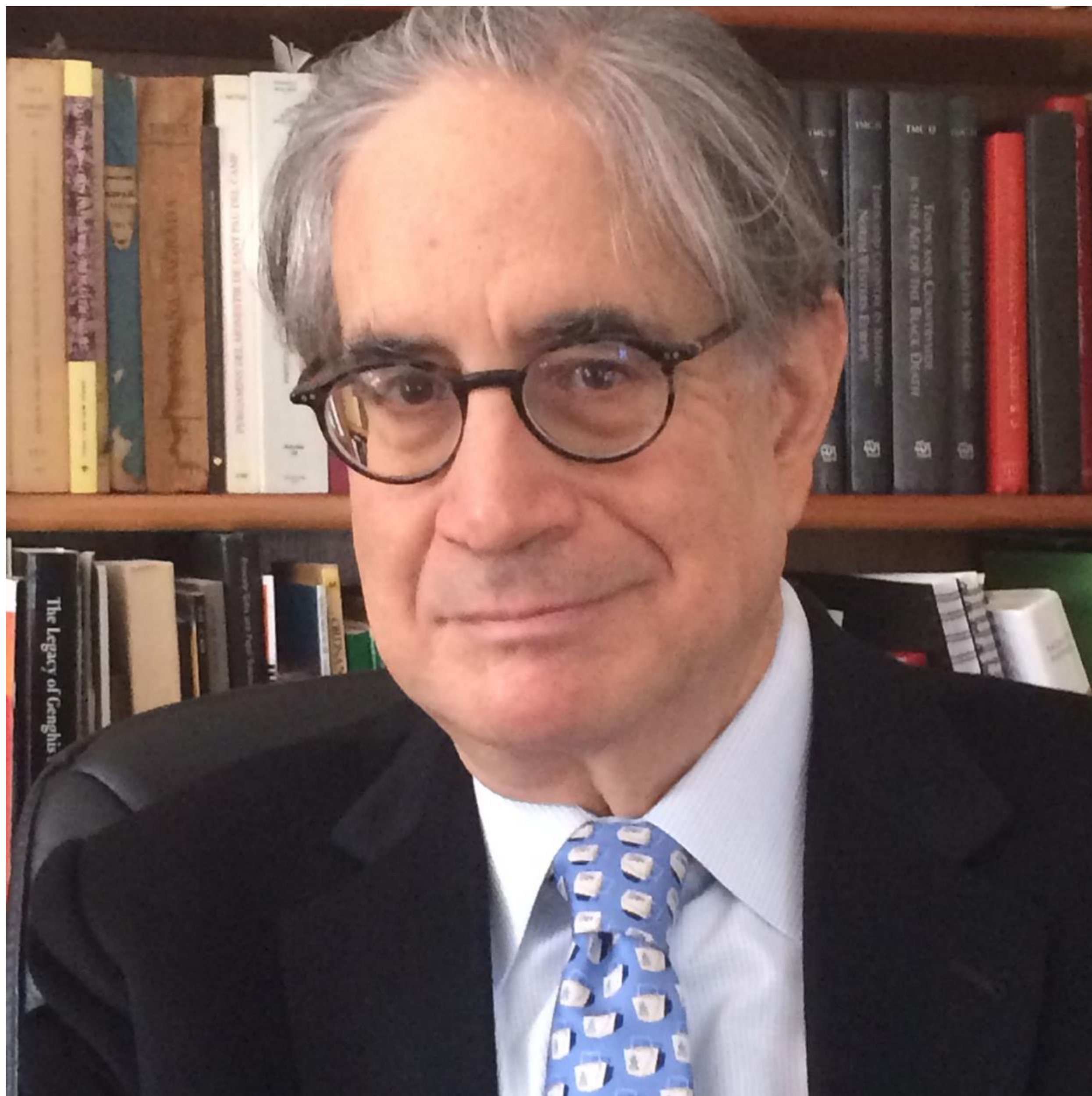

Paul Freedman

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Abstract

Paul Freedman is the Chester D. Tripp Professor of History at Yale University. A specialist of the Middle Ages, he has spent much of his career studying the history of medieval peasants and cuisine. He taught at Vanderbilt University for eighteen years before joining the faculty of Yale in 1997. In this interview, Freedman discusses first meeting James C. Scott at the Institute for Advanced Study and his connection to the Agrarian Studies Program before coming to Yale; his interaction with the program over the years; the program's impact on the intellectual interest of food; and the challenges the program has faced and how it has adapted over time.

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Table of Contents

Project history vi

Interview 1: September 25, 2018

Hour 1 1

Career focus on the history of the Middle Ages — Transition to Yale University in 1997 after teaching at Vanderbilt University from 1979–1997 — Connection to James C. Scott through interest in medieval history of peasants — Introduction to Scott and others with similar interests at the Institute for Advanced Study — Development of academic interests beyond Catalonia at the Institute — Scott's association with Clifford Geertz at the Institute — Scott's humor, April Fools' Day — Connection to the Program in Agrarian Studies before moving to Yale — *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* book — Familiarity with Carlos Eire at Yale before moving to Yale — Collaborative instruction in the Agrarian Studies Program seminar at Yale — Unique interdisciplinary nature of the seminar — Scott's widespread influence and driving curiosity — Unusual format of the seminar — Themed lunches after seminar sessions — Influence of the Agrarian Studies Program on intellectual interest in food — Scott's influence in the success of the program — Challenges faced by the program — Changes in the focus of the program over time — Hopes for the future of the program

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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,

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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 unfed 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

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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.

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Interview 1: September 25, 2018

01-00:00:06
Holmes: All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 25, 2018. I have the pleasure of sitting down with Paul Freedman, professor of history here at Yale University. This is part of the Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, and we are here at the Agrarian Studies Office at Yale University. Paul, thanks very much for sitting down with me to talk on this rainy morning.

01-00:00:33
Freedman: Pleasure.

01-00:00:35
Holmes: To get started, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came here to Yale.

01-00:00:42
Freedman: I'm a historian of the Middle Ages. Belatedly, that is, in the last ten years, I've developed an interest in the history of food and cuisine, but most of my career has been the history of Europe, between the fall of the Roman Empire and 1500. I taught at Vanderbilt University from 1979 to 1997, and in 1997 I moved to Yale. I was interested in the history of peasants in the Middle Ages, and that's really my connection with Agrarian Studies, and with Jim Scott, which comes before I actually arrived at Yale.

01-00:01:24
Holmes: How did you first meet Jim?

01-00:01:27
Freedman: I first met him at the Institute for Advanced Study, where we both had fellowships in the academic year 1986-1987. The Institute for Advanced Study offers semester-long or year-long fellowships to faculty members. Often, although not always, they are faculty members who are reasonably well-established, but embarking on new projects. I would say that, pre-internet, the two different kinds of faculty members within that category were people from places like Yale, who already had very good research opportunities, libraries, and colleagues, and then people like me. Vanderbilt was, and is even more so now, a wonderful university, but again, pre-internet, it was more isolated. I had very few medievalist colleagues, not only there, but within a 200-mile radius. I was working, for the first time, on a topic that was not so much dictated by the very narrow focus on Catalonia, the archives that I worked on, but on understanding medieval peasants, and the oppressive system under which they labored, and their agency, and even opportunities for rebellion. So, for me, the Institute for Advanced Study was a chance not only to meet other medievalists, although that's what I knew I would get out of it, but less anticipated to meet people who studied peasants, or subordinated classes, or thought about the resistance of such people, direct and indirect.

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And so, the opportunity to meet and get to know Jim was absolutely crucial in my intellectual development and career.

01-00:03:34
Holmes: You've known Jim now for quite some time. What are some of the more memorable stories or incidents that stick out in your mind that you'd like to share?

01-00:03:43
Freedman: At the Institute for Advanced Study, which, of course, was a very serious and rather tense place—I mean, for me, it was very relaxing, in that it gave me an opportunity to do a lot of work by myself. But particularly, Jim was associated with the social science group, centered, at that time, particularly around Clifford Geertz. The atmosphere there was really fervid. This was in the first years of the MacArthur grants, and it was widely believed or understood that Geertz had one a year of these fabulous gifts in his possession, as it were. There was always a sense that if you could impress Geertz somehow, your career was made. He was rather aloof and undemonstrative, so it was very hard to get his attention, or to get his favorable attention. Jim was completely outside of that. Among other things, Jim had a certain spirit of not just independence, but of comedy. For example, on April Fools' Day, he let loose some white hens, or chickens, in the little area that was between our offices and the cafeteria—it was an enclosed area—just to see the reactions of people. The permanent faculty, and many of the older, temporary visitors, didn't notice them, but these were people who, as I remember remarking at the time, their definition of privilege was to be immune from popular culture, kind of like the scholars in the then-popular novel by Herman Hesse, *Magister Ludi*. They're, like, living on a mountaintop without any kind of contact with the gross material world, and I was convinced that many of them didn't know who the Beatles were. The popular culture had absolutely no resonance. These people just went to lunch and probably didn't even notice that there were white chickens. But the majority of people were kind of amazed. So it wasn't a prank—and this is typical of Jim—it was just like a wake-up, or an agrarian reminder at a place that, although in the countryside, was perhaps the total opposite of the atmosphere that Jim had. That's one of my first memories of Jim as exceptional, not only in words, but in deeds.

01-00:06:31
Holmes: You came to Yale in 1997. Discuss how you got involved with the Agrarian Studies Program.

01-00:06:37
Freedman: I had already given a paper at Agrarian Studies when I was at Vanderbilt, based on my work on peasants in the Middle Ages. The interesting thing about Catalonia in the Middle Ages in this context is that it had an actually successful peasant rebellion, successful to the extent that the peasants who revolted between 1462 and 1486 achieved the abolition of serfdom. There are many ways in which this is not quite the complete victory that it sounds like.

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It's a little bit like the Emancipation Proclamation for slavery in the United States. It abolishes slavery, but it doesn't abolish subordination by any means. Nevertheless, it's unusual. I, at the time, had just written a book called *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia*, which was based on my work that I had started at the Institute for Advanced Study, and at Catalan Archives, in the late 1980s. That was my familiarity with Yale. The only two people I knew at Yale before I came here were Jim and a historian, who had also been at the Institute for Advanced Study in my year, Carlos Eire, the historian of Spain and of the Catholic Church.

01-00:07:56
Holmes: When you came to Yale in 1997, is that when you started having a regular participation within the colloquium?

01-00:08:04
Freedman: That's right.

01-00:08:06
Holmes: Did you ever get a chance to teach in the seminar?

01-00:08:09
Freedman: I did. I did several times. Maybe, I guess, three times, twice with Jim, and once with Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan], and sometimes with a third colleague, like Bob Harms, for example.

01-00:08:23
Holmes: By the time you show up in 1997, you've already had almost twenty years of academic experience, at least at the professorial level, under your belt. Discuss your observations and experience of teaching the seminar. How was it unique or different from other seminars that you've been exposed to?

01-00:08:46
Freedman: Well, it was uniquely interdisciplinary. There's a lot of talk about that, and certainly in medieval studies, we are interdisciplinary almost without the word being used, but in terms of methodology and how you approach things. Particularly for me, I never have had a seminar with so many graduate students. It's more than a critical mass. It's just a different kind of teaching experience, with people from different geographical points of view. The other thing was that Jim has, like Clifford Geertz for that matter, two distinct characteristics that raise him above the merely accomplished level, let's say, and why a documentary could easily and appropriately be made of him. Those are memorable turns of phrase. Clifford Geertz coined all sorts of things, like "thick description," and Jim also—"seeing like a state." There are so many distillations of reality that he has developed. At that time, when I came, and for many years thereafter, even in the History Department, the most frequently cited person in graduate student applications, outside of Foucault, I would say Jim Scott second, or maybe even more than Foucault. You had people who were familiar with a certain line of thinking, and perhaps even more than Foucault, Jim's line of thinking and attention to things changed, so that he was

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not someone who simply focused his entire career on peasants, or his entire career on Southeast Asian highlands, or his entire career on the ambition of state bureaucracies to control things, or food, or all of these subjects in succession or simultaneously, so that the seminar was large, but everybody had a familiarity with Jim's approach, particularly to the agency of subjugated, or officially subjugated, communities.

01-00:11:35
Holmes: Jim has mentioned that in that seminar, he always felt that he learned just as much from his colleagues and the students than probably any of the students ever learned anything from him, which, as you referenced, it's kind of a typical, humble phrase. That's Jim. But I also think that it acknowledged how much he appreciated such environments, and also how much of an eternal student he is.

01-00:12:01
Freedman: I'd say the latter. That is, I don't think that's literally true, although who am I to judge? I have had classes where I learned a lot from students, but "learned a lot from students" often means they had read something that hadn't occurred to you. So, it's sort of more like a footnote, or a library reference. But okay, that sounds not completely implausible. The curiosity that he has, many well-known scholars, simply through pressure of having to perform, or participate in various kinds of discussions at the initiative of their people, repeat themselves, or dig the cave that they've carved out further—whatever metaphor I'm struggling for—and he would just go onto another cave, or another landscape feature. And so, his curiosity is what drove him, and that curiosity undoubtedly would be stimulated by colleagues or by students.

01-00:13:19
Holmes: I want to talk a little bit about the colloquium. When the seminar began in the spring of 1990, and in the fall of '91, the official Program of Agrarian Studies begins, which includes the colloquium, many have commented on how the unique, intellectual space, of the seminar was then matched every Friday in the colloquium Discuss your experience with the colloquium Again, as one who had such a wide experience before coming to Yale, you've been to probably a number of seminars, a number of colloquia. What is it about the Agrarian Studies colloquium that you find so rich and unique?

01-00:14:07
Freedman: Well, different things at different times, although, consistently, the fact that the papers are circulated in advance, which, at one time, was not common, particularly, again, pre-internet, when you had to photocopy them and make them available to people physically. You couldn't just attach it to an electronic message. This may have been an imitation of the Davis seminar, the history seminar at Princeton University. But a crucial difference was that Jim insisted that the paper-writer, the guest, be silent for the first rather substantial amount of time, and then collect the comments and comment on them, so that this format was what most people found unusual. It's hard for the paper-giver. He

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or she has to make a lot of notes and remember what the notes mean in order to respond to comments and questions, but it gives a kind of coherence to the seminar, as opposed to simply a tennis match, bouncing back and forth off the interlocutor. So that's the most memorable thing.

This has not been true for many years, but when I was a guest, when I was still at Vanderbilt—and this would have been 1991 or 92—the most memorable, or one of the memorable aspects was that, at that time, after the seminar people adjourned to lunch at what was then the Business School cafeteria nearby, the meals were usually oriented toward the topic of the paper-giver—at least their geographical area. If the subject was peasants in Pakistan, there would be a more or less a Northern India / Pakistani meal. If it was on peasants in Mexico, it would be a Mexican meal. Mine, which was on peasant rebellions in the Middle Ages or something like that, Jim said they had a tough time coming up with that, because the capabilities of the Business School cafeteria did not extend to medieval cuisine. So we had steak and shrimp, the theory being surf and turf, the emphasis on the turf. I had forgotten that as an example of Jim's particular take on things, but it certainly was among the memorable parts of my first presentation at the seminar.

01-00:16:57

Holmes: I'd like to hear your thoughts on how Agrarian Studies has impacted you as a scholar. Particularly, I know your earlier work has also focused on peasants, but you also began to focus on food and cuisine as well later in your career. It could have dovetailed, but anyway, what has been the impact of Agrarian Studies for you intellectually?

01-00:17:22

Freedman: Certainly, it has been profound, even though I don't work on peasants in the Middle Ages to the degree that I did at one time. Indeed, at a meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, where I presented recently—I presented a paper on two Catalan cookbooks of the fifteenth century. So, you would think that was well within my intellectual purview. It's Catalonia; it's medieval. But somebody asked me, "Whatever happened to the Paul Freedman of *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia*?" As in, you were once a serious person, and now you're asking us to sit through a paper on cookbooks. Among other things, even beyond peasant studies and studies of resistance of ordinary people, my interest in food, and justification of it as a serious topic—if it needed that justification, which it shouldn't, but to the degree that it does—certainly has been inspired by Jim's own interest. Jim's own interests are like mine, even though I never had a farm, never had sheep, never had the agrarian lifestyle or adventures that he's had. But I think both of us thought of food as something very important, culturally, without it being necessarily a marker of personal sophistication. [Ludwig] Wittgenstein famously once said that he didn't care what he ate, as long as it was the same thing every day. But most academics like to experiment with food, and like to visit different kinds of restaurants, and fuss about food, and talk about food, more than most other

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people. I think historians, unlike anthropologists or people who have a lot of field work, like Jim, don't easily think of food as a cultural reference, and so, to this day, I would say that my colleagues in the History Department at Yale are pretty much uninterested in this as a topic. To the extent that I've been able to get some kind of academic orientation, it's been from anthropologists or from Agrarian Studies.

01-00:20:01
Holmes: If we think of the program now, it's encroaching thirty years, which, as you could probably testify more than myself, is pretty astonishing in light of the lifespan of academic centers and programs. They kind of can come and go, or what have you. More importantly, Agrarian Studies, to this day, still has developed this tight-formed community, and the seminar and colloquiums are still packed on most days. From your experience, what do you think are some of the keys to that success of the program?

01-00:20:41
Freedman: Well, it's Jim Scott. Those of us who have taught in the program, or support the program, I think acknowledge that it is centered around him. I think it can survive beyond his directorship. Some centers do persist when they are funded by the university and part of the university's identification. One can't imagine Johns Hopkins just deciding, you know, the Center for Strategic Studies has lasted long enough, or has run out its lifetime. There are certain things that are part of the central mission of the university. I would have hoped that by now, Agrarian Studies would be perceived that way, but frankly I don't think it is. I think it's perceived as a personal project of Jim's. I don't think it's particularly well-funded by the university. I think everybody says what a great idea it is, but it's not well-supported. Again, it's my opinion. I don't say this dogmatically, but as an observer, it has nowhere near the kind of heft that our multiple institutes that deal with international relations do.

01-00:22:09
Holmes: That leads me to a point. You've been deeply involved in the program since coming here, helping with the selection of postdocs, teaching in the seminar. From your experience and observations, what are some of the challenges the program has faced over those years?

01-00:22:29
Freedman: Money. At one time, it had much more funding for postdocs than it does now. It's constantly regarded—and I don't know why—as somehow not pulling its own weight. It had more outside members who were given some limited privileges, that the university decided, somehow, impinged—as if they were freeloading off the university by borrowing books from the library. So, involving people outside the Yale community, funding in general, postdoctoral fellowships beyond the two or three that are now allowed. It's probably an ungracious complaint about this, so I am officially not complaining. It's great to have any kind of funding, and it's good that we have this fellowship that's lasted for thirty years and has forged some real

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intellectual accomplishments. But if the question is what are challenges, then those are what I see as the major ones.

01-00:23:50
Holmes: Since coming here in 1997 and really becoming a part of the program on campus, I want to hear some of your observations about the growth of Agrarian Studies. How has it changed over time, and adapted over time as well?

01-00:24:07
Freedman: I think that it has changed from its original focus, which was pretty clearly peasants. It never was called peasant studies; the name Agrarian Studies was a careful determination of a wider scope. But agrarian, at one point, crucially included people who are not agrarian, and part of Jim's work has been on people dismissed as either part-time agrarianists, slash-and-burn agriculturists, or Stone Age populations that existed before agriculture. Indeed, ironically, his latest work has tended to emphasize what a downer agriculture has been historically, or what a setback to human liberty it represents. So that kind of contextualization of agriculture and agricultural activities, greater orientation towards food, and as a cultural expression, not simply as a necessity. This parallels some changes in the acceptance of Jim's own work. That is, I don't think you have to demonstrate to people that oppressed classes have agency. You can expand the definition of oppressed classes. I don't think, anymore, you have to demonstrate that peasants are not somehow a hopelessly subjugated class who lie between tribal people, whom anthropologists like, and supposedly civilized people, who have become modern. Certain kinds of battles have been essentially won, at least within the academic world: a lot of new approaches to the implications of social and environmental developments; much more attention to the environment, climate change, refugees, and displacement, as opposed to stable and oppressive systems. Perhaps if I had to identify one development, it's simply the greater focus on uprooting and instability, whereas the start of this program, the belief was that peasants had a kind of immemorial attachment to one particular place.

01-00:26:43
Holmes: Here as Agrarian Studies is encroaching its thirty-year anniversary, what are your hopes for the program in the future?

01-00:26:53
Freedman: I would hope that, first, it survives. That it continues to attract students and faculty from a lot of disciplines. I'd like to see the continuation, if not even expansion, of the participation of History, which is always, on the one hand, very important and very big; on the other hand, not always driven by some of the same scope and methodological questions. I will retire in the not too distant future, so I should emphasize that my hopes are just that, hopes, and not things that I am going to be intimately involved in. The hope is not only for survival, but for the same agility at moving among topics that are

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becoming more prominent, and are of more interest to the students that we are attracting to Yale.

01-00:27:57
Holmes: Paul, thanks so much for sharing your time and observations. Are there any final thoughts that you would like to add?

01-00:28:05
Freedman: No, Todd. I'm grateful for the opportunity, because it reflects my decades-long engagement with this, in ways that give me pleasure.

01-00:28:17
Holmes: Thanks so much, Paul.

[End of Interview]

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