

Robert Harms

*Robert Harms: 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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Robert Harms

Abstract

Robert Harms is the Henry J. Heinz Professor of History & African Studies at Yale University. He was among the founding faculty with James C. Scott of the Agrarian Societies graduate seminar and the Agrarian Studies Program. In this interview, Harms discusses teaching the first Agrarian Societies seminar; the founding of the Agrarian Studies Program and its impact on him as a scholar; his experience and interaction with the program over the years; and reflections on both the program and Jim Scott.

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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

01-00:00:01

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 to sit down with Robert Harms, professor of history here at Yale University. And we are at the Agrarian Studies office at Yale University, as part of the Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. Bob, thanks so much for sitting down with me today.

01-00:00:28

Harms: Happy to be here.

01-00:00:31

Holmes: We want to talk about your experience with starting and being affiliated with the Agrarian Studies Program. But maybe a good way to start is for you to tell us a little about yourself and how you came here to Yale.

01-00:00:47

Harms: My field is history of Africa, and when I graduated from the University of Wisconsin with my PhD, my first job was at UC Berkeley as a visiting lecturer. I was told at the time that the subsequent year they were going to do a regular search for an assistant professor and that I could be a candidate for that search, and I'd be in on the ground. So, I moved to Berkeley, and by the time I got there, I found out that Jerry Brown—this is the earlier incarnation of Jerry Brown—had cut the budget, and there wasn't going to be any African history search the next year, so I immediately started applying for jobs and got an offer from Yale. I moved literally from within sight of one ocean to within sight of another one.

01-00:01:51

Holmes: And what year did you come to Yale?

01-00:01:56

Harms: That would have been fall of 1979.

01-00:01:59

Holmes: And how did you first meet Jim Scott?

01-00:02:05

Harms: I had read *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* when I was in graduate school. So, when I was at some faculty event and somebody said, "That's Jim Scott," I went up and introduced myself to him.

01-00:02:33

Holmes: Now, discuss how you got involved with Agrarian Studies.

01-00:02:39

Harms: At the time, I was interested in the subject of peasants, which is why I'd read *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. And I was thinking of doing a project to produce what I would have called "The Peasant History of Africa," a history

of Africa from the ground up or from the bottom up. Well, who is at the bottom? It's the ordinary farmers, which might fit into the category of peasants. And peasant studies was popular at the time.

I thought it was time for a peasant history of Africa. I must have mentioned it to Jim at some point or something because then when he wanted to organize the first graduate seminar in Agrarian Studies, I was one of the people he invited to participate, to see if we were interested and how would we do it? It was basically from an interest in peasants that I got involved, that's the way I put it. Peasants are obviously agrarian, so it all goes together.

01-00:03:59

Holmes:

Discuss your experience of that first seminar, which I believe was in the spring of 1990.

01-00:04:08

Harms:

What happened was that we had about forty students, and apparently it was the biggest graduate seminar in Yale that semester, so for some reason a lot of people had become interested in it. We were in a big room and it was filled with people, and there were four of us. There was Jim and me and Helen Siu and John Wargo. We took turns lecturing, and like they do today, at the end of each lecture, we divided into discussion groups, and each one of us led a group. It was my first experience with team teaching.

One of the things that was useful was that a lot of team-taught courses at the time would have that two or three professors, and then at any given meeting of the class only one of the professors would show up. The ones who weren't lecturing that day would just stay away. But this [course] was organized so that all four of us were involved in all aspects of the course, even for the final papers, where each one would be read by two people. So, it was really a collaborative effort.

01-00:05:33

Holmes:

Compare that collaboration and what you got out of that versus other seminars that you had taught, because by that time you'd already been at Yale for over a decade.

01-00:05:46

Harms:

The graduate seminars that I normally taught would be in African history. And African history had a very small number of graduate students. So, I was used to very small seminars, maybe six people, maybe four. So, this was totally different in that sense. And, the other thing was, in a seminar that I taught myself, I would pick the books I liked. Here, I picked one quarter of the books for the seminar, and my colleagues picked the others. So, what it meant was that I had an opportunity to read things that I would have never read otherwise.

01-00:06:44

Holmes:

Jim himself has mentioned that one of the great fulfillments of that seminar was that he got to learn just as much from the students and his colleagues than they probably did from him. Did you have that same experience? Even at this time, this is a pretty interdisciplinary seminar in many respects.

01-00:07:03

Harms:

Oh yeah, because Jim was political science. I was history. Helen Siu was anthropology, and Wargo was forestry and environmental studies. The team then changed from year to year, but it was always interdisciplinary. For me, as a person who works mostly on Africa, I got really interested in a lot of the literature on French peasants, [Emmanuel Le Roy] Ladurie and [Fernand] Braudel and people like that. And so, it gave me a chance to read things outside of my field that I probably wouldn't have read if I had just stuck with teaching courses on African history.

01-00:07:57

Holmes:

In the fall of 1991, the program of Agrarian Studies officially kicked off. I know you were also a part of that. Tell us a little bit about working with Jim and others to put the program together in those first couple of years.

01-00:08:14

Harms:

I didn't do much because Jim had a grant. It was Ford or SSRC or one of these foundations headquartered in New York. And, they just basically gave him, I think, money for the first two years or so and just said, "Come up with a program." He did a lot of discussion with them and so on. It really wasn't until he had the general idea outlined that then he presented it to me and others and asked if we thought it would work or how it should be modified or things like that. He came up with the basic structure. I guess, what makes this program unique to this day is the idea that the speaker or the person whose paper we're reading is gagged for the first half-hour or so.

We carry on a discussion as if that person wasn't there. The paper presenter gets to listen in on a discussion of his paper, and then at the end of perhaps half an hour or whenever the discussion starts to die down, they get to respond. That's something that I'd never heard of before, and it's an idea that Jim introduced to us. I don't know where he came up with it, but that was a hallmark of the program from the beginning.

01-00:09:57

Holmes:

One of your former students, Louie Warren, when talking to him about this program—because I know he was involved as a graduate student at that time—one of the things that really struck him about both the colloquium and the seminar was just how unique of an intellectual space the Agrarian Studies Program created, both in the seminar and the colloquium. You had been here at Yale since 1979. Did you see it as a very unique space in how it compared to maybe other programs and colloquia you've encountered.

01-00:10:45

Harms:

Well, for me, I had been involved in African studies, which is an interdisciplinary program, even though it didn't put on a graduate colloquium like this or anything. I'd been involved in African Studies in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, which was also interdisciplinary. So the idea of being interdisciplinary was not new to me. But, what was new to me is that the different people involved were specialists in different parts of the world. So, we'd have a paper on the Iowa State Fair one week and peasant rebellions in Southeast Asia the next week and things like that.

I guess, the thing that was different from anything I'd been involved in before was the way we hopped around the world. And we hopped across the centuries. There'd be one paper about something that's going on right now and another paper about something going on in the Middle Ages, so the whole world throughout the sweep of history was the playing field, I guess.

01-00:12:12

Holmes:

Bob, what really attracted you to the program? You participated in teaching the seminar and being in that rotation, but you also showed up many Fridays throughout the school year to participate in the audience of the colloquium, to be part of the community of the program. What kept you coming back? What kept your interest?

01-00:12:42

Harms:

Well, as I mentioned, I originally started being interested because I was thinking about writing a book on the peasant history of Africa. And, what I learned from the program is that there's so much variation in agrarian societies and historical trajectories and so on that it would be such an oversimplification to cram it all into one book. I abandoned the project once I realized how many facets of agrarian societies existed and how they didn't all fit together into neat patterns. It's a good thing, actually, that I abandoned the book because it might have been a poor book.

But once I did that, the thing is that I was not only teaching, because I basically taught every year unless I was on leave. But, also, when Jim was on leave, I would often run the seminar, and so it became sort of an institutional base for me. I participated as much as possible while I was involved in both the course and the Friday colloquium.

01-00:14:15

Holmes:

The program now is almost encroaching thirty years, which is very rare for a university program. If you could, maybe share what kind of memorable events stand out from the colloquium to you over the years?

01-00:14:37

Harms:

That's hard for me to answer because I've been to so many, and each one is unique just because of who came or what the topic was or so on. So, nothing

comes to my mind that just pops out as being more memorable than the others.

01-00:15:09

Holmes:

The program also, when we think of the seminar and the colloquium, began to grow over the later years, even producing and helping sponsor conferences. Do any of those stick out in your memory?

01-00:15:30

Harms:

Well, the chicken conference, I guess, simply because it was so unusual. You didn't expect a big international conference at Yale about chickens. There's nothing particular about the conference that stands except for the fact that it existed.

01-00:15:56

Holmes:

Do you remember people's reactions when you say, "Hey, by the way, we're going to have a conference on chickens"?

01-00:16:05

Harms:

I wasn't involved in organizing it, so when it came I just attended. What I found was that it was possible to have very, very interesting discussions starting with the notion of chickens and then moving out to a whole variety of other issues that were in one way or another related to chickens. I think the conference, even though it sounded like almost a frivolous topic or whimsical topic, [it] actually contained a lot of very serious discussion and solid intellectual content.

01-00:16:54

Holmes:

It's interesting you say that because that seems to me a great metaphor for a lot of things Agrarian Studies does. It's something that seems so simple or, as you said, a whimsical topic. And yet you dig in, and the discussion can just go on for hours.

01-00:17:10

Harms:

Yeah.

01-00:17:15

Holmes:

When we think of the program being around for nearly thirty years, what do you see as some of the keys to the program's success?

01-00:17:25

Harms:

Well, if you look at the topics of the papers over a two- or three-year run, there's a huge variety, so the program never sort of settled into a kind of rut of sameness. One could never predict, "Oh, the Agrarian Studies colloquium is coming up on Friday. They're going to be talking about the same thing they always talk about," because each week was different. I think that sense that it didn't slip into a rut, and there were always new people and new topics and new papers and new issues, was the main thing that kept it going.

01-00:18:23

Holmes:

If we think of your long involvement with the program, what kind of impact intellectually and as a scholar did the program have on you?

01-00:18:35

Harms:

The main thing was to interact with not only people from other disciplines but who do work on other parts of the world. So, it was certainly a very broadening experience because one week there's an economist who works on Ghana, and the next week there's an anthropologist who works in Vietnam or something like that, and so you're constantly being exposed to not only new places and new problems, but new ways of approaching them that are different from my own. It's hard to stagnate intellectually when you're in that kind of an atmosphere.

01-00:19:33

Holmes:

That the program has been around for nearly thirty years, such doesn't mean there hasn't been bumps in the road, particularly when we look at the fiscal cycles of any university, with budget cuts during various times of recession. What do you recall as some of the challenges the program has faced over the years?

01-00:19:57

Harms:

Well, there was a big challenge when the original—I think it was Ford and Rockefeller—money ended, and that money had always been intended to be short term. That ended, and we had to switch to other forms of funding. There was a time when we weren't sure where that was coming from. I wasn't personally involved in the search for funds, so I just sort of heard secondhand about how it was going. But there was Jim and Kay Mansfield and others that put a lot of work into finding and securing a funding source for the program to continue.

Most of these bumps took place in the background, and certainly, the people who attended the colloquium or the graduate students who attended the seminars were probably not aware of them. The seminar just continued every year, and the colloquium continued every year. The administrative scrambling to find funds was kept among the organizers of the program and didn't really spill out into the larger community.

01-00:21:33

Holmes:

Speaking of community, I have two questions on this. There's a long list of faculty who have been involved in one way or another with the program. Who are some of the faculty that stick out in your mind? Of course, outside of Jim and yourself, who have been big supporters of this program?

01-00:21:59

Harms:

One of the most interesting faculty members, I guess, is Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan] because he was a graduate student when he first was a student in the first graduate seminar. Then, he was hired as a graduate administrative assistant to help run the program. He had a background as a

high-level civil servant in India before he came, so he was very well organized and knew how to put things together and make them work. We depended a lot on Shivi in those days, and he was a graduate student, so it's rather amazing that he later came back as a faculty member and runs the colloquium on a regular basis.

I suppose he's the main person that sticks out in my mind. Others would participate from time to time and then move on to other projects. But, Shivi is sort of a constant, from the beginning to the end, although for a while he was not at Yale. But he was involved at the beginning, and he's still involved now.

01-00:23:29

Holmes:

When we also look at community, graduate students are a big part of this program, both in the seminar and also with the colloquium, as well as with the program's other activities, such as the spring series. Graduate students are a difficult base to maintain in some regards, because every six years or so, there is turnover. You described what keeps you coming back, but to be able to continually throughout the years attract new graduate students to the program, what do you think is the key that success?

01-00:24:21

Harms:

It's partly just finding graduate students who are interested in these kinds of issues, which includes environmental issues, economic development issues, issues of social formations. There are a whole series of issues then, and [for] graduate students who are interested in those issues, it's often one of the reasons they choose to come to Yale because they know they'll get to participate in the Agrarian Studies Program.

01-00:25:04

Holmes:

I wanted to ask in regards to Jim—you've known Jim now for a number of decades. What are some of the most memorable stories of Jim Scott? Michael Dove is notorious of always just giving a smile and saying, "Jim's such a character." And it's a good description of Jim Scott for those who've never actually met him. But, what are some of the memorable stories that strike out in your memory of Jim Scott?

01-00:25:34

Harms:

Well, the basic thing is, I don't have any stories about specific quirks or foibles or anything like that, but just that he's always been very, very open. When I first met him and he saw that I was interested in some of the same things he was, he immediately reached out and formed a connection, and we stayed connected until the time came to organize a seminar. And then he called me [in] on that, but he does that to people all over. He's got such an enormous network of people that he's reached out to. They reach out to him, and then he reaches out back. And he keeps up with them. He doesn't forget them.

And the second thing about him is, I almost believe that he's read every book in every discipline that has any bearing on the subjects he's interested in, because in conversations or in discussions in classes, he'll pull examples from all sorts of books. And I would think, "Well, you're officially a political scientist. I'm astonished that you've read this book or that book, or you're aware of the work of this scholar or that scholar." So, I think the main thing that always struck me was that he seems to have read everything, and he seems to know everybody.

01-00:27:17

Holmes:

Here towards the end of our conversation, I just wanted to ask, what are your hopes for the program that you were a part of creating as it moves on past thirty years?

01-00:27:34

Harms:

I don't have any ideas about reinventing it or making it into something else because sometimes with programs people get together for meetings from time to time, [and say] that if we want it to survive, we have to reinvent it. My feeling is that if it would ever come to the point that we would feel we needed to make it into something else, then maybe it shouldn't continue anymore. So, I see continuous renewal coming from finding new people to come and give papers, finding new faculty members to join the team teaching the colloquium, finding new topics to discuss. I'm happy with continuing the same format and keeping it fresh, again, through the people, the topics, the books we read and things like that.

01-00:28:32

Holmes:

Bob, it's been great to be able to sit down with you. Any final thoughts or remarks you'd like to add?

01-00:28:38

Harms:

No, just that it made my life at Yale much more interesting than it would have been if it hadn't been a part of it.

01-00:28:49

Holmes:

Well, thanks so much, Bob.

[End of Interview]