

Alan Mikhail

*Alan Mikhail: 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 2019

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Alan Mikhail

Abstract

Alan Mikhail is a professor of history at Yale University. Specializing in Middle Eastern and environmental history, he has been involved in various capacities with the Agrarian Studies Program since arriving at Yale in 2010. In this interview, Mikhail discusses the influence of James C. Scott's scholarship and meeting Scott for the first time; his involvement with the Agrarian Studies Program; the unique aspects of the program and its impressive longevity; and the legacy both Scott and the program have left at Yale.

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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: November 4, 2019

01-00:00:05

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is November 4, 2019, and I have the pleasure of sitting down with Alan Mikhail, professor of history here at Yale University. We're here at the history department in his office on Old Campus. Alan, thank you so much for sitting down today. Well, I wanted to get your thoughts on Jim Scott, of course, and your experience with the Agrarian Studies Program. You represent almost a third generation that's come through, in many respects, interacting with the program. But before we get to that, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and your road to working here at Yale?

01-00:00:50

Mikhail:

Thanks. Let's see, my road to working here at Yale. So I did my PhD at [the University of California,] Berkeley, and I went to Berkeley to study Middle Eastern history. There were at the time two professors I was really interested in working with, who worked on the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East in the early modern period, and it was an incredibly strong department on the whole. So I went to Berkeley, and I did indeed study those kind of things, the early modern Middle East. But it was during my time there that I kind of stumbled into environmental history, which is not something I knew existed when I went to graduate school; it wasn't something I therefore expected to end up doing. But I became interested in a set of topics that did back me into environmental history.

I was interested in doing something on the rural world, I was interested in peasants, I was interested in water, in disease, in relationships between town and country. I came to a dissertation topic that was organized around water management. And to get a handle on how to think about some of those topics, I started reading as much as I could, and lo and behold, many of the people who were working on these things called themselves environmental historians. I read Don Worster's book, being in California, and that opened up a whole new set of horizons for me. I read Richard White's book on the Columbia River. I read many things that had nothing to do with the Middle East but helped me think about water management and the politics around that. So I worked on a dissertation that had to do with water management and all these other topics: wood, labor, disease, food production. That became my first book.

01-00:03:10

When I was finishing my PhD, like all graduate students, I applied to a bunch of jobs, and I got this job at Yale, luckily enough. And one of the ways that I thought about myself when I was on the job market at that moment was that I was a Middle East historian who worked on the Arab world and the Ottoman Empire, and I was an environmental historian. I think I hadn't yet fully gotten my environmental history legs under me, but I was beginning to.

So when I came to Yale, of course, Agrarian Studies was one of the jewels in the crown, and I had read Jim Scott's work, of course, in graduate school, and it helped me think about a lot of different topics. That was wonderfully fortuitous and was just an incredible, incredible thing for me to be here and to be able to benefit from Agrarian Studies and the environmental history world here more generally. That helped me to catapult into environmental history in a much more serious way.

01-00:04:34

Holmes:

You mentioned that you came across Jim's work in your graduate reading. Maybe tell us about the first time you actually met Jim Scott. Because there's a lot of people that, it's interesting, they read his work, and then they meet him in person, and it's like, wow, just as impressive. He has a very interesting personality, of course.

01-00:04:56

Mikhail:

Yeah. I think it was at one of the Friday colloquia during my first year here. I think I probably went to the first one I could have gone to. And, yeah, I think the first time I introduced myself to him was at the lunch after the paper. I remember him biting into a chicken drumstick with much abandon, and so I found that very endearing. But yeah, so he had and still has an interest in rivers, and so the fact that I had written about the Nile and things I think was interesting to him, so we talked a little bit about that. I gave him my book. That was the first time I met him.

01-00:05:58

Holmes:

Well, tell us a little about your involvement in Agrarian Studies. Because even as a young junior professor coming into Yale, you were fairly active and at least participated in the program quite a bit.

01-00:06:11

Mikhail:

Right. My first year, I went to a lot of the Friday colloquia, and in my second year, I presented a paper, which was great. And then I ended up teaching a few years later. In the semester I taught, Jim was not teaching; it was myself, Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan] and Peter Perdue. All of those were great experiences. I've had some of my students comment on papers in the colloquium as well.

01-00:06:48

Holmes:

Discuss the experience teaching. Did you know that Shivi was actually in the very first Agrarian Studies seminar?

01-00:06:55

Mikhail:

As a student?

01-00:06:56

Holmes:

As a student. As were environmental historians such as Louis Warren and Paul Sabin—

01-00:07:01

Mikhail: Right. Sure, sure.

01-00:07:03

Holmes: Most people talk about this seminar, particularly when it first came out, that there was nothing else like it on Yale's campus. It was team-taught; it was interdisciplinary. What was your experience teaching that?

01-00:07:18

Mikhail: It was great. One reason is, because there are two other professors, you get to hear your colleagues lecture, so I learned a great deal from my colleagues. Also, in the sort of spirit of Jim Scott, it was very creative and open to whatever ideas I brought to it. I did some, I thought, fairly standard lectures on the agricultural history of Eurasia and the spread of certain crops and water management and empires and those kind of things. And at the time I taught it, I was also very interested in human-animal history. So I thought it was a little off the wall, but one of my quote-unquote lectures was to show *Grizzly Man*, the movie, and I paired some readings with it about animals in film and animal history more generally, and then we had a discussion around that. So the fact that the Agrarian Studies team was completely open to me doing that I think is a sign again of creativity and the embracing of imaginative and kind of harebrained ideas.

01-00:08:29

Holmes: The Agrarian Studies Program started in 1990 with funding and kicked off in '91 officially with the colloquium. But there was also, years later, affiliates of Jim, such as Michael Watts and Nancy Peluso, who start a similar colloquium at UC Berkeley on the political environment. Were you involved with that, or?

01-00:09:01

Mikhail: I was not. I knew those folks, and I knew geography at Berkeley had this kind of critical ecological element, and so I went to some talks and things, but I was never a part of the colloquium they set up there. When was that created?

01-00:09:16

Holmes: Oh, I'd have to go back and look. But yeah, it was a while after this, because Agrarian Studies was the model for that, from the speaker being gagged, etc.—the entire operation.

01-00:09:33

Mikhail: No, I never went. The first gagging experience I had was here, yeah.

01-00:09:40

Holmes: Well, you know, I don't actually get to interview that many people who actually presented there. So tell us a little bit about the experience when you presented at Agrarian Studies? The format's discussed by many as something very unusual but also very stimulating. What was your view?

01-00:10:01

Mikhail:

At first, I was very intimidated, not so much by the format, but just the venue. In some ways, it's nice, because you don't have to prepare a talk. I had written something—not specifically for this event, but I had this paper that I was working on, and so I presented that. So it's great, because you are essentially the audience for forty-five minutes as people, very smart people, who have read your paper, have things to say about it, and you can kind of let that wash over you. And yeah, I took a lot of notes. And it did change this article I was writing in very fundamental ways and set me off on some different paths. That's one of the things I've always appreciated about the colloquium, whether as a presenter, in this case, or an audience member, a participant. The fact that the audience has to fill up forty-five minutes gives license to this sense of intellectual play—serious play, but play nevertheless—that allows interesting ideas to come out. People inevitably relate it to what they know, which is probably what you as the presenter don't know. So it allows you to see if that works, if those ideas can bounce off of the wall of all the people in the room. And that is something that I feel, again, is in the spirit of Jim, this being fully confident and grounded in the work that you're doing, but sort of throwing it out and letting it bounce around and play and then seeing where you end up. In the colloquium, I felt that I had this piece that I was pretty confident about, and I knew what I was doing, but I wanted to test it and wanted it to get challenged, and so the colloquium was very good for that.

01-00:12:12

Holmes:

Well, you've attended probably a number of the colloquiums over the years. What are some of the most memorable events that you've observed?

01-00:12:23

Mikhail:

Some of the most memorable—let's see. I remember René Redzepi, who is the head chef, CEO, you know, chef-in-chief of Noma, the restaurant in Copenhagen that was rated as one of the best restaurants in the world for a number of years. There were a few years where Agrarian Studies was heavily sort of critical food studies orientated, and so it was part of that, because he is essentially a forager. He told this story about there not being a lot of fresh produce growing in Copenhagen in the middle of winter, and so someone on his team in the kitchen brought this almost moldy carrot, and they had to figure out a way to make this gourmet, fancy, delicious meal out of it, and they did. Anyway, so he gave this talk about being an outlaw chef, and also brought food, so I think that's probably why I remember it, but that was a really exciting thing. And again, that's, I think, part of Jim's sense of bringing in interesting folks, whether or not they're "academics." He was someone like that. So that was very memorable.

01-00:13:59

Holmes:

They've also put on other events, such as conferences. I know there was the famous chicken conference—

01-00:14:05
Mikhail: Right. I wasn't here for that, but I have the poster.

01-00:14:06
Holmes: There was also the Food Sovereignty conference, and then the pig conference.

01-00:14:12
Mikhail: The pig conference, yeah.

01-00:14:12
Holmes: Did you attend any of the latter two?

01-00:14:14
Mikhail: I did not attend any of those, unfortunately. I don't know, I think I was on leave or something for the pig conference.

01-00:14:18
Holmes: Yeah. It's always hard.

01-00:14:20
Mikhail: I wish I would have.

01-00:14:23
Holmes: But then you've also been to dinners at Jim's farm a number of times.

01-00:14:25
Mikhail: Yes, yes.

01-00:14:27
Holmes: Discuss your experiences there. What's the atmosphere like?

01-00:14:31
Mikhail: Yeah, it's great. It's so much fun. The chickens are pecking around, and there's always a lot of people there. Jim has a great house, and it's kind of open and flowing, and people are sitting in different rooms. The food is always really good. And it's just a warm, beautiful atmosphere, and Jim is sort of the impresario in his apron, wielding knives and cutting lamb legs and things. It's always wonderful, right, when a mentor, a teacher, invites you over to his or her house. It's even more wonderful when you get to see them in their shorts and in an apron running around and just being a normal human being. So there's no pretension with Jim ever, but in that space, in his house, it's wonderful to see him in his element there. And I was last at his house just a month ago or something, and, as you probably know, his barn has burnt down, and so he lost a lot of materials, but it was being rebuilt, and so his workspace was moved into the main house, in this small little office. And I remember a couple of us went in there and he told us about what he was working on and showed us his shelves and things. I love seeing people's workspaces, so it was really great to see his temporary office, at least.

01-00:16:10

Holmes:

Yeah, he told me about the barn, because it was when I was here last year, around the same time, we were in there. We almost filmed one of his interviews in the barn—and in retrospect we should have. I wanted to get your thoughts on what you think the unique aspects of the Agrarian Studies Program is vis-à-vis many other programs that I'm sure you've come into contact during your career.

01-00:16:39

Mikhail:

Well, I think most importantly is the intellectual remit of the program. Again, this is where I sort of come back to Jim, because it really, in my opinion, is built in his image, in the sense that it is global, first of all. Geography obviously matters in a very real way but also doesn't matter. It's this combination of political theory, environmental history, peasant studies, postcolonial studies, critical race theory, Global South, geography, in a way that is unique in bringing all those things together and having it make sense and work. And then I think people buy in partly through just the power of Jim's persuasion and intellect but also because they see what the results are—presenting in the colloquium, the conferences, how creative it is. I can't think of any other venue that brings together that kind of intellectual ecosystem in such a productive way, in the way that Agrarian Studies does.

I think having the fellows program, some of whom are quite distinguished, is a wonderful thing. So having this group of four to six people who are working on very different things but are committed—or forced, at least—to come to the Friday colloquium and take it seriously and have to engage creates a really nice community. And those people now have populated all kinds of departments, programs, institutions, even outside of the academy, and I think that's created this kind of kinship network across the world that, you know, always think very warmly about their time at Agrarian Studies.

The longevity, the number of people who have passed through, and the creativity I think are the things that have made it magical. It's not just a lecture series, it's not just a one-off visit and then the person's gone; these people are here for a year. The presenters get really important feedback. And then the class. Connecting it to a class, too, was a brilliant move, in the sense that it is training students drawn from all over this campus—from divinity to anthropology—in this mode of thinking and this mode of work.

01-00:19:48

Holmes:

The Agrarian Studies Program is going on thirty years, and for an academic program to reach nearly thirty years is pretty remarkable, and in today's environment, almost unheard of in some respects. What do you see as the keys to that success? You were hitting on a lot of them right there. Is there anything more you'd want to add of the success of Agrarian Studies?

01-00:20:17

Mikhail:

Well, I think the sense of nimbleness and freshness, of not thinking there's just one way, but being open to new things and allowing that to actually be brought into Agrarian Studies. So I'm thinking again of the kind of critical food stuff. It seems as though that was a period, and it's maybe no longer one of the central features, but it was for a while, and that allowed for the Food Sovereignty conference, for interesting people to teach in the course. And now maybe we're moving on to slightly different things that have to do with climate, for example, or something else. So I think it's, again, because Jim is an active, interesting scholar—all his books are pretty different, and so he's obviously always moving, so in some ways, the program, I feel like, is always moving too and hasn't gotten stuck in one mode or another. Yale has put resources behind this, and that's important for longevity, and we hope that continues.

01-00:21:36

Holmes:

Now, you've worked with Jim for almost ten years, nine years or so, right? What are some of the more memorable stories or something that you'd like to share about Jim?

01-00:22:02

Mikhail:

I don't have any sort of completely embarrassing stories about him to tell. I think just his generosity in wanting to include me, but obviously others, in the program, and I felt that in all kinds of ways. By inviting me to his house, by reaching out to me about particular speakers to come to the colloquium, inviting me to dinners, all of those kinds of things. Even sometimes when I hadn't gone for a year and a half or two years, even, to the colloquium, but he was still welcoming enough to bring me in, and I always thought that was very generous of him and makes me feel very good about being a part of the program.

01-00:23:10

Holmes:

What kind of legacy do you think Jim and Agrarian Studies has left here at Yale?

01-00:23:15

Mikhail:

Huge. Again, no one's like Jim, so it's a singular sort of legacy that he's left here—and beyond Yale—through his scholarship, but also through the program. The results are everywhere. So in graduate school, right before I ever came to Yale, *Seeing Like a State* was everywhere, and so it seemed like everybody was reading that and citing it in their SSRC applications and things like that. And so I came to know the Jim sort of reach first through his scholarship, which I think is the most important reach that he has. But then coming here, I saw how the structure of Agrarian Studies that he created—he probably wouldn't like the word "structure"—but it helped to reinforce avenues through which these ideas could percolate out into the world and affect different fields and different geographies. He's one of the most important thinkers obviously of our lifetimes, or, I don't know, of the past two

hundred years? I often think he's someone who's most comfortable, in terms of his geographical home, in Southeast Asia. I did ask him once why so much important theory in the social sciences has come out of Southeast Asia. So I think of [Clifford] Geertz and Benedict Anderson and Jim Scott; I'm sure there are others in there I'm forgetting. And the answer he gave is, "This is a place that doesn't have one dominant cultural mode, one dominant language, one dominant religion, and so you're just faced with the fact of difference and having to explain that difference and conflict in power, et cetera, and so that lends itself to a lot of social scientific work." And I thought that was right, and I had never thought about it until he put it that way. So he's just a towering giant, which makes his sort of humility and generosity all the more remarkable. Just the lack of pretension—he's in his shorts and an apron cooking for everybody, with his chickens running around. It's kind of a remarkable thing.

01-00:25:59

Holmes:

Indeed. I was always struck by on the back of the books when you read the bio line, the title Sterling Professor of Political Science is often accompanied with mediocre farmer and beekeeper, or something like that.

01-00:26:10

Mikhail:

Yeah, and that's part of his political orientation to the world—always trying to poke fun at these structures of power: the Sterling Professorship, Yale University, the United States.

01-00:26:27

Holmes:

Absolutely. What are your hopes for the program in the future?

01-00:26:32

Mikhail:

Well, obviously that it continues. You know, it's hard to imagine Agrarian Studies without Jim. I'm sure I'm not the first person to say that. But I think it would also be a shame if Agrarian Studies didn't exist. So I think Jim is someone who wouldn't want it to continue in some static understanding of what his "vision is," but would want it to be taken in new directions, and whoever leads it to do what they think is right. He's not someone who thinks that he "owns it," but that it should have a life of its own and continue to evolve. I hope they keep the structure the same, of the colloquia and the fellows and the course, but in terms of what is the next generation of what Agrarian Studies looks like, that will depend on the people involved. It will certainly not be the vision of Jim Scott—one, because it's singular, and two, because it will be other people. But yes, it should absolutely continue. I expect that it will, and I'm excited to see what it will become.

01-00:27:51

Holmes:

Alan, I really appreciate your time today. This has been great. Any final thoughts before we go?

01-00:27:56

Mikhail: Any final thoughts? No, I think this is a wonderful thing that you're doing, and I'm sure there are hundreds of people who want to talk about Agrarian Studies that have passed through. I'm glad this is happening.

01-00:28:12

Holmes: All right. Thanks so much, Alan.

01-00:28:14

Mikhail: Thanks.

[End of Interview]