

Alison Richard

*Alison Richard: 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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Alison Richard

Abstract

Alison Richard is the Franklin Muzzy Crosby Professor Emerita of the Human Environment and former provost of Yale University. In this interview, Richard discusses her admiration for James C. Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program; the decision to support the program and place university resources behind it as provost; as well as her experience in evaluating university-based programs as provost of Yale and vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge.

Table of Contents

Project history vi

Interview 1: September 26, 2018

Hour 1 1

PhD study at London University, job offer from Yale University, and eventual provost position — Introduction to James C. Scott and the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale — Providing funding for the Agrarian Studies Program and questions of the program's endurance — Factors in making decisions about programs as provost — Provost perspective of the Agrarian Studies Program — Memorable stories of Scott

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 26, 2018

01-00:00:06

Holmes:

This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 26, 2018. I have the privilege of sitting down with Alison Richard, professor emerita of anthropology here at Yale University, as well as many other positions she's held throughout her career. This is part of the Agrarian Studies Oral History Project and we are here at the Agrarian Studies office on the campus of Yale University. Alison, thanks so much for taking the time here this morning.

01-00:00:48

Richard:

You're welcome.

01-00:00:50

Holmes:

Maybe we should start out with you telling us a little bit about yourself and how you came here to Yale.

01-00:00:56

Richard:

Well, I came to Yale in the deep, deep past. I came in 1972. I was just finishing up my PhD at London University, and there was no such thing as a job market in those days, and I was going off to Alaska to study muskoxen, and then I got a phone call out of the blue from David Pilbeam, who was then a professor here in anthropology, but who had been my supervisor when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge. And he said, "Well, we have an opening here. You must be just about finishing your PhD. Would you be interested in applying for the job?" to which my response was, more or less, "Where's Yale?" I had no idea.

Anyway, I flew over here, gave a job talk, got offered the job and, in the feckless way the young, swanned off to America with no idea that I'd meet my husband here, raise a family here, that this would essentially be my adult life, with the exception of seven years in Cambridge. So, I started out as an assistant professor in anthropology, and then became DGS, and then became chair of the department, and then became queen of the dinosaurs, as director of the Peabody Museum. Why any of this would qualify one for being a provost, I have no idea, but anyway I became provost in 1994, and remained provost until I left to be vice chancellor at Cambridge in 2003. Then I came back here, not actually as a professor, but as an emeritus professor, an old professor, in 2010, and I've been happily being old and working away since then.

01-00:02:38

Holmes:

Maybe tell us a little bit, how did you first meet Jim Scott?

01-00:02:42

Richard:

Well I knew you would ask that, and it's lost in the mists of time. I have no idea. It was long ago. He was clearly an amazing, brilliant figure. Though he obviously was in political science, he felt like an anthropologist, he sounded

like an anthropologist, and a lot of his interests were anthropological, but they were more in sociocultural anthropology, the subfield, and I was a biological anthropologist, but a biological anthropologist with very broad interests. So, you can say that I knew and admired him from afar for many years, but only got to know him better after I became provost.

01-00:03:29

Holmes:

Did you have any interaction or experience with the Agrarian Studies Program when it first started, which I believe was the fall of 1991?

01-00:03:36

Richard:

No, but it quickly became widely known, because it attracted students, and faculty, and of course, visitors of an extraordinarily interesting, eclectic mix, thinking and talking and writing about really interesting subjects. So, I knew that Agrarian Studies was one of the stars in the heaven of Yale when I became provost in 1994, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

01-00:04:18

Holmes:

The program was funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations for I think the first ten years or so, and then as foundations usually do, they say, "Well this is great. I think your home institution now should probably fund you because we have to go start other things." Talk about the experience, in your role as provost, of deciding to put university money and support behind the Agrarian Studies Program.

01-00:04:56

Richard:

I don't remember the details of this, but what I remember is that we, the provost's office, made a contribution, I think, pretty consistently, but it was a small piece. I may be wrong on that, but I remember that we were putting some money into Agrarian Studies. It was one of these wonderful—which isn't always the case—one of these wonderful programs that attracted a lot of outside funding and foundation money. We were very proud of Agrarian Studies, and glad to help, and that was what it was. It was helping, in a modest kind of way. There were moments, as I recall, when some bridge funding was needed between grants, and I think that we did that, again, because it was just doing such fine work, and Jim is such a remarkable figure.

The interesting moment for me came—and it actually wasn't resolved on my watch—in the form of a philosophical question, about the landscape of a university, if you will. If you have a program like Agrarian Studies, which is really a manifestation of Jim—to me anyway it was a manifestation of Jim—what is its long term future? I remember having discussions with him just in the year before I stepped down as provost, because he was concerned about the long-term place of Agrarian Studies in the Yale landscape. And I remember saying to him, "Jim, this is Jim Scott's intellectual genius at work here, and we should view it as a moment in time, and not try to endow it, because if we try to endow it, in ten, twenty, thirty years' time, some poor provost is going to be stuck with trying to twist somebody's arm to be the

director of Agrarian Studies, and that's not what this is about. This is an intellectually incredibly exciting moment in time, and think of it as that. It's yours. It's not part of some broader intellectual landscape."

That was what I thought at the time, but that's sixteen years ago. Now, if I were having that conversation with Jim, I don't know what I would say. It's interesting to me because as a provost, there are the established, supported, ongoing activities of a university, with education and research and all that goes along with them. Then, there are these amazing innovations. So, the question is, if you keep all of them forever, then there's no space for anything else, and so when do you decide that something needs to be there forever? And if so, the university needs to find the resources, but I don't think it's actually a question about resources. I shouldn't say this, but resources can always be found if you really, really, really want something. But for me, the question was a more philosophical one about whether this was something, in its wonderful, incandescent way, that should be there forever.

Now, as I say, in 2002 I was not persuaded, and I remember quite lively debates with Jim, because you imagine what he thought about this. There was no question in Jim's mind. Fifteen years later, as I look at the world, and think about our planet, and think about feeding ourselves, I think my answer may be rather different, if I had to give it. This program brings together an array of disciplines in a setting where people are developing and then using a shared language to talk about very complex and far-ranging issues that are incredibly interesting in their own way, but which are also of consequence for our world, now and going forward.

As a provost, you live the life of a voyeur. You don't have time to actually do things; you watch them from afar. So, I read *Seeing Like a State* because I couldn't bear not to. You do those things late in the evening before you fall asleep, before another impossible provostial day gets going, and I loved Jim's work. It was very interesting to me, and with the passage of time, my own interests have expanded to be much more broadly anthropological. You could call it that I've just become the dilettante I always was, but an academic career didn't quite allow me to be. But it means that I've ranged more widely in what I read and think about, and Jim has what is—I don't need to tell you this—this scholarly, iconoclastic, creative mind that I admire hugely.

01-00:10:33

Holmes:

I wanted to ask, because I know you're short on time: You've served as provost here at Yale University as well as back at Cambridge, is that correct?

01-00:10:47

Richard:

At Cambridge, I was the vice chancellor, which is essentially the president—well actually, it was the president and provost rolled into one position, which is more than one person can do, so I tried to quietly grow a provost person, and we functioned like a team.

01-00:11:15

Holmes:

You've had to make a lot of decisions about programs such as Agrarian Studies over that time, some easy, maybe some extremely difficult. Tell us, from that perspective, because you just spoke very well in regard to your experience with Agrarian Studies, but if we took a bird's-eye view of these kind of programs, what kind of rubric or decision making does a person in that position really have to grapple with, because you can't fund everything, right?

01-00:11:43

Richard:

No, you can't fund everything. I said, "You can always find money for the things that you really want," but it's very easy to really want everything, because there are so many interesting things going on. First of all, it has to come back to students and faculty. You can sit in a provost's office and think whatever thoughts you want to think, but they're largely irrelevant. There's no such thing as the institution. Well, there is, but the institution, as far as I'm concerned, are the scholars and scientists, the academics, the graduate students, the postdocs, the undergraduates. It is a community of scholars, and if there isn't much interest, or if the interest is perfunctory, or if it's the interest of one person or two people with a passion, well, then you say, "This isn't really embedded in this place." And of course, Agrarian Studies was both. It was the passion of one person and the inspiration of one person, but Agrarian Studies also has all these wonderful sort of tentacles out into a very wide and deep community of interest and engagement. So, there's this question of, "Is this intellectual space here forever?" That's one set of questions. Another set of questions is about the people—it may be interesting, but if you don't see a community of interest, well then, all bets are off.

So it's a community of interest, it's intellectually important, and then it also involves leadership. The longer I live, the more convinced I am that leadership matters, and great leaders make things happen, and of course, Agrarian Studies qualifies on all fronts. Now making these decisions is really difficult, and you only find out twenty, thirty years into the future if the decision was a really bad one, when you find your university is simply not active in a domain where everybody else is charging forward, but I don't think that those things become evident quickly. If you close down a program, whoever's involved is furious because you closed it down. That is to be expected, and it would be wrong if that weren't the case, but in the larger scheme of things for the enterprise, it doesn't become clear immediately as to whether you made a good decision or whether it was a really poor one based on an incomplete understanding of what it really meant, and why it was important. Anyway, Agrarian Studies was still going strong when I stepped down as provost, and it's clearly still going strong today, so this is great.

01-00:14:57

Holmes:

Last question: You've been around the universe quite a bit. Is there any memorable stories that stick out in your memory of Jim?

01-00:15:04

Richard:

Memorable stories of Jim. I was never firsthand in memorable stories. Oh, Jim brought me a piece of sheep as provost one year, I remember. It was one of his sheep, a sort of leg of lamb or something like that, and he said that this was an offering to the provost [laughs]. Honestly, I can't remember quite how he couched it, but I remember being greatly amused at the time. It was very anthropological. It was sort of a gift to the ancestors or something like that, and it was delicious, of course. But I don't pretend to know Jim well. I admire him and I also love him from afar, that's really the truth of the matter.

01-00:15:56

Holmes:

Well Alison, thanks so much for your time this morning.

01-00:15:59

Richard:

You're very welcome. I'm happy to be talking about all of this.

01-00:16:03

Holmes:

Thank you.

[End of Interview]