

Paul Sabin

*Paul Sabin: 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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Paul Sabin

## **Abstract**

Paul Sabin is a professor of history and American studies at Yale University and leads the Yale Environmental Humanities Initiative. His interaction with the Agrarian Studies Program actually began as an undergraduate, when he enrolled in the first Agrarian Societies seminar. In this interview, Sabin discusses his recollections of that seminar as a student; his introduction to Agrarian Studies as a scholar; and the uniqueness of the program's colloquium and impact of James C. 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: November 1, 2019

01-00:00:04

Holmes: All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is November 1, 2019. I have the pleasure of sitting down with Paul Sabin, professor of history here at Yale University, and we are in the colloquium room of the Yale Agrarian Studies office here on the campus. Paul, thanks so much for sitting down.

01-00:00:23

Sabin: My pleasure.

01-00:00:25

Holmes: Well, I wanted to get your thoughts on, of course, Jim Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program, and I know you were here as an undergrad, so you have a very peculiar insight that many other faculty do not.

01-00:00:36

Sabin: That's true.

01-00:00:37

Holmes: But before we get to that, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and your road here to Yale?

01-00:00:44

Sabin: Okay, sure. Well, I have the strange distinction of having moved to New Haven four times in my life, then moved away each time not realizing I was going to come back. Came here as an undergraduate, which is when I had the first opportunity to meet Jim. Studied history and environmental studies here at Yale, then went to Ecuador for a year and studied oil and gas development in the Amazon, and decided to go back to grad school in history. Went out to UC Berkeley and did a project there on oil development in California. And when I was writing up the dissertation project, I actually ended up back here in New Haven. That was number two. My wife was in law school, so I was familiar with the scene here as a visiting graduate student and then a lecturer. Moved away again, came back, and was a sort of visitor here, and then along the way in there, I also started up a nonprofit, Environmental Leadership Program, and left to do that. Then came back in 2008 and have been here since on the faculty. So anyway, it's a little in and out of New Haven. I've seen it from a lot of different sides.

01-00:01:58

Holmes: Well, they say New Haven has a peculiar way of drawing people back, correct?

01-00:02:02

Sabin: It seems to. Each time I've come back, I've always been surprised to be here, [laughter] but I enjoy it.

01-00:02:07

Holmes: So how did you first meet Jim? Is that during your undergraduate years?

01-00:02:17

Sabin: Yeah. Let's see, I was an undergraduate in history and environmental studies, and I really enjoyed the long research projects that were possible in the Yale undergrad curriculum. I think I met Jim in—it must have been the spring of 1990. And in the fall of that year, I took an undergraduate seminar as a sophomore with Professor Robert Harms in African history, and it was on development and underdevelopment in sub-Saharan Africa. So it was very much on themes related to development—environmental history, some policy, political economy, things like that. And I remember, I wrote just a short paper in that class on Tanzania and Ujamaa and kind of the state-centered concentration of people into settlements. And then I heard there was this other class that was happening in the spring, and somehow I talked myself into it, and I met Jim there. I think I must have met him on the first day of the Agrarian Societies class in the spring of 1990.

01-00:03:35

Holmes: What do you recall from that seminar? I've heard various stories of those who were in that seminar, particularly when it was first proposed, and the idea of getting outside the orthodoxy of the Yale classroom. The class was going to be team taught, there's themes from all over, and we're just going to throw it on the table and go. What was your view of the seminar?

01-00:04:00

Sabin: Well, I didn't know what to expect. I was a sophomore and had only just taken the seminar the previous semester—I mean, I had a couple other seminars, but I didn't know what at all to expect. I remember it was Jim; Bob Harms; I think John Wargo, who I'd also taken a class from; and then Helen Siu. So it was very interdisciplinary. That was the fascinating part of it. And it was my first introduction, really, to political science and anthropology, you know, the more social science disciplines. I'd come more from a historical perspective. So I remember reading a lot of theory on agrarian societies. It was fairly theoretical. Honestly, the single thing I remember about it was just being scared out of my wits being in there with these graduate students. It was a very high-powered class. It was large. I don't remember exactly—you probably know better than I do what the number was. It was a large class. It was an hour and a half. I remember there was a long period of time at the beginning with a lecture of some kind, and then we broke up into smaller discussion groups. It was just a very impressive group of people who were very serious. And it being an interdisciplinary group was fascinating, and I think that's been the characteristic of Agrarian Studies ever since—to bring together these people across disciplines in a very intense and serious way.

01-00:05:36

Holmes: The program officially starts in the fall of 1991. This was the start of the colloquium series and what we would now recognize as the kind of standard

elements of Agrarian Studies. What do you recall of those colloquiums? Yale has a lot of programs, and brings a lot of speakers for the students to campus. But to be able to do that at such intensity week after week after week is quite remarkable.

01-00:06:10

Sabin:

[laughter] It's more than remarkable; it's really amazing. As a sustained activity, I don't really know of much quite like it. And as an undergraduate, I had moved on and wasn't really aware of the ongoing colloquium—I don't think I participated in it as an undergraduate. But when I came back as a graduate student maybe five or six years later, I did come to some of the colloquiums, the sessions. And in my view, they've been remarkably consistent in terms of the types of activities, the caliber of the visitors, the format of gagging the speaker to allow for an intense response to the paper followed by conversation with the speaker. The way that Jim, and also now Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan] have held the community together over the years is quite impressive, and I think a lot of academics can look at that as a model. Just think about what it takes in terms of personal investment, both in terms of time, in terms of intellectual investment. You know, to devote two and a half hours every Friday to the event, with the session itself and lunch—it's just very impressive.

01-00:07:33

Holmes:

I'd like to hear more of your thoughts on this, because a number of people have told me that they encountered the program as a graduate student, and then when coming back as a faculty member, they gained a new appreciation. You know, maybe at one of their universities, they're trying to start a program, or something that's similar, and they realize that's a lot of work.

01-00:08:01

Sabin:

I absolutely think that's true. I'll just speak for myself—when I was a graduate student I don't think I quite appreciated the flexibility I had in my schedule with the time and the ability to come participate in a colloquium like this and kind of make it a destination in the week. But for a faculty member managing administrative demands and the structure of the courses and all the advising and everything—to really lock down and block out this time week after week to create a community is admirable, and what's impressive about it is that it's been worth it. [laughter] So I think a lot of people can put a lot of effort into trying to create a community, and you don't always know what there is to show for it, and this has really, I think, operated at a very high level in terms of the intellectual engagement, and the results are evident in the work that people have gone on to do.

01-00:09:06

Holmes:

Next year will be thirty years since the program was originally funded.

01-00:09:11

Sabin:

No, that can't be true! [laughter]

01-00:09:14

Holmes: Which makes all of us feel old.

01-00:09:15

Sabin: Exactly, exactly.

01-00:09:16

Holmes: But in thinking about a program being sustained for thirty years, particularly in the academic environment, that's hard to maintain. From your perspective, with both your interaction with the program and even just observing it from afar, what do you think some of the unique aspects, in comparison to other programs you've come into contact with over your career, that has allowed Agrarian Studies to be that successful for thirty years?

01-00:09:49

Sabin: Well, I mean, the single most significant thing is certainly Jim's presence. I think he's the common thread through the thing, and other faculty have rotated in and out, and different people have taught the class. But I think he's been pretty consistent over that time period, and that's been very important. I think they've done a good job in more recent years of broadening that, and Shivi has stepped up to play a co-directing role, and that's been an excellent thing. Yeah, so what has made it possible? An openness to the broad range of people from throughout the community participating, drawing graduate students in from different disciplines, so it's not just one discipline. You see people here from history, anthropology, political science, other parts of the campus. I think they've also managed to evolve a little bit. And I haven't gone back to look at what the topics were in the early years compared to more recent years, but my impression is that the colloquium has changed, to some extent, and broadened its definition of what is an agrarian topic. There's been a significant commitment to environmental history, which I really appreciate, but also you see some urban, some industrial, some more contemporary issues, but also going back and thinking about the past more theoretically. I think it has had a consistency but also a certain flexibility which I think has been important.

01-00:11:42

Holmes: On the topic of flexibility, a number of people have commented on that evolution, as you were pointing out, the evolution of the program of grabbing on and incorporating new topics. If we look from the beginning, it was about peasants, peasants' revolution—

01-00:12:00

Sabin: Exactly, right, right.

01-00:12:02

Holmes: —or peasant studies, then in more recent years it has included food politics and environmental studies—

01-00:12:11

Sabin: Energy, food, yeah, lots of things.

01-00:12:12

Holmes: —and getting the Yale Sustainable Food Program involved, getting more of the environmental studies crowd involved. That kind of flexibility—

01-00:12:21

Sabin: And I think it's hard for a program that is locked into a particular way of looking at the world to sustain itself, and so I would see that as being essential to its ability to continue. And so what the program becomes is a place where these disciplines and these concerns intersect, but it's not rigidly held onto. So yeah, that's been an important piece of it, I think.

01-00:12:49

Holmes: Well, I know you've been also very busy since you came here in 2008, running some of your own programs in environmental studies. Are there any other observations or memorable moments that you'd like to comment on in regards to Agrarian Studies? Any final thoughts?

01-00:13:12

Sabin: Let's see. I was going to say something. We were talking about Jim Scott and his role, and one thing I wanted to just sort of recollect a little bit in terms of my impression of him over the years is both the gentleness with which he engages with people and his openness to different ideas, but then that masking this very sharp and incisive intelligence and argument, and the forcefulness of the argument. I've also been quite impressed by the mark that his scholarship and the experience of the Agrarian Studies Program has left on people. Some of the cohort that was there as graduate students, I guess, when I was an undergraduate—people like Karl Jacoby and Louis Warren—when you go back and look at those works in environmental history, you can just see the direct impact of working with Jim on those projects, the ideas about moral ecology, the role of the state in simplification, all those things. So I think that's just one thing I would want to recollect. And I guess another aspect would be the good spirit of the program—always giving everyone a keychain with a little tractor on it, and there's a good humor to the program that it manages to balance the sharply intellectual with a sense of fellowship and community.

01-00:14:54

Holmes: Well, Paul, thank you so much for your time.

01-00:14:56

Sabin: Sure, happy to.

[End of Interview]

Appendix: Yale Agrarian Societies syllabus

2-4 For Thursdays  
Tues. Wed.

will-12-22  
1

2-1393, 2-1359

2-3680

2-5100

Locke  
Marke  
Benham  
mill

articles at Khko's

readings SSL under  
Anthro 541b

Anthropology 541b  
History 965b  
Political Science 779b  
Forestry & Environmental Studies 730b

Instructors: Robert Harms  
James Scott  
Helen Siu  
John Wargo

Agrarian Societies: Culture, Society,  
History, and Development

*Lubus, Augustus, nec non et lunus Aestas.*

AESTAS  
Adolescentibus magis

*Frugifera arvis fert Aestas torrida messis.*