

Ian Shapiro

*Ian Shapiro: 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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Ian Shapiro

Abstract

Ian Shapiro is a Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University and former Henry R. Luce Director of the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies. In this interview, Shapiro discusses the unique aspects of the Agrarian Studies Program; the decision process of which programs the MacMillan supports and how Agrarian Studies fit that criteria; as well as recollections of James C. Scott and the benefits of the Agrarian Studies Program to the disciplines such as political science.

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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

01-00:00:00

Holmes: 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 Ian Shapiro, the Sterling Professor of Political Science here at Yale University, and we are here at his office on campus at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut. Ian, thank you so much for sitting down with me and taking the time.

01-00:00:29

Shapiro: Pleasure. Thanks for coming by.

01-00:00:32

Holmes: So obviously we wanted to sit down and talk about James C. Scott as well as the Agrarian Studies program, which he founded, but before we get to that, maybe tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came here to Yale.

01-00:00:48

Shapiro: Actually, Jim Scott played an important role in that outcome. I'm originally a South African. I left in 1972, and I lived in the UK for most of the 1970s. I was just finishing up as an undergraduate there when I realized that if I wanted to continue to stay out of South Africa, I had to continue to be a student. And this was the time when the British were figuring out that they could charge American-style tuition to foreign students, but of course there were no fellowships. And one of my professors there said, "Well, you should go to the US. They pay you to go to graduate school." First time it had entered my head to think about coming here. So I applied to a few places, but, you know, the British system is such that there's not continuous assessment, so I had no grades, because everything is on your final exams, and I hadn't finished my degree. So I had no grades of any kind. I had not taken the GRE. I had letters from people nobody at Yale could possibly have heard of. So in the normal course of things, somebody like that wouldn't even make it to the long list, never mind the shortlist. But it just turned out that this was the one and only time Jim Scott was running the admissions committee, and evidently, Jim being Jim, said, "I don't like all these criteria. Let's just take some people who look a bit different." And so that was why I was admitted to the PhD program here. Any other year, I wouldn't have been admitted because I just didn't check any of the boxes. And they admitted twenty-nine people, probably half of whom were gone by Christmas, [laughter] but I managed to survive. So he actually played a decisive role in the reason I came to Yale.

01-00:03:05

Holmes: So you finished your PhD in political science in 1983, is that correct?

01-00:03:11

Shapiro: Yes.

01-00:03:12

Holmes: And then you were hired by Yale.

01-00:03:14

Shapiro:

Well, then I went to the law school. I had decided I didn't want to be an academic at the time, and so I was going to retool as a lawyer. But while I was a student there, they held a search in my field here and ended up hiring me, so then I went up and down between here and the law school for a while, but then settled in, yeah.

01-00:03:38

Holmes:

And then you were also director of the MacMillan Center [Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies].

01-00:03:42

Shapiro:

I was, yeah, for fifteen years, and that turned out to be where the Agrarian Studies program became housed, and we were very happy to support it.

01-00:03:53

Holmes:

And then in 2005, you were named the Sterling Professor of Political Science, which is an honor you actually share with Jim.

01-00:04:02

Shapiro:

That's right.

01-00:04:05

Holmes:

Is it common for them to have two Sterling in the same department, or did they figure that Jim's been around long enough that he'd retire sometime? [laughter]

01-00:04:14

Shapiro:

No, there are no rules about these—they're given out at the discretion of the president. But there are sort of common-law norms, and traditionally political science has had about two or three Sterling Professors. In a previous era it was Bob Dahl, Ed Lindblom, and Juan Linz, and in our era, it's been David Mayhew, Jim Scott, and me.

01-00:04:42

Holmes:

Oh. That's very good company to keep.

01-00:04:44

Shapiro:

Absolutely, yeah. Happy to be in it.

01-00:04:48

Holmes:

Well, how did you first meet Jim Scott? I'm imagining as a graduate student.

01-00:04:51

Shapiro:

As a graduate student, when I showed up here in the fall of 1978 having been the fortunate beneficiary of the episode I just related. That's the first time I met him, yeah.

01-00:05:06

Holmes:

Well, maybe let's talk a little bit about the program—what do you recall about the start of the Agrarian Studies program?

01-00:05:14

Shapiro:

So I'm not exactly sure when it started. On the substance of the program, I've always been rather peripheral because it's not my field, though over the years, because part of my work is on Africa, I often find that they do bring in interesting speakers and postdocs. So I've sort of drifted in and out of it. But I think that both the substance and format of it have been crucial to its longevity and success. The most important thing is that it revolves around original scholarship based on research done by the authors. There's nothing derivative or secondary about what the people are doing. And then secondly, they occupy this unique space that's sort of at the intersection of political science, anthropology, and history. They involve other disciplines, but the intersecting set is—if you did a Venn diagram—that's basically how I think of them. So that brings the analyticity of political science with the historicity of historians and the—what's the word?—the ethnographic focus of anthropology together in a way that you don't often see. And I think that that's been the secret to the best work that's come out of it, that's produced. As others have probably told you, there's a hugely successful series of books published by Yale University Press. Outstanding articles. A whole generation of scholars who have come through the program have wound up in first-rate universities. So I think that's all good.

And then the way they run the program—the seminar is typically taught by several faculty members from the different disciplines, and it has a huge constituency. Most graduate courses at Yale, if they're not cross-listed as undergraduate courses, have three or four students in them. This course routinely has dozens of students in it, PhD students from the various fields. It may be historically unprecedented, at least at Yale, to have for so many years such a successful, widely subscribed graduate seminar.

01-00:08:15

Holmes:

You mentioned the colloquium. In many respects, a lot of people see it as one of the most well-known aspects of the program, the Friday colloquium happening every week, where they bring in scholars from around the US and at times around the world. What do you recall of some of the colloquiums that really stand out in your mind that you may have visited?

01-00:08:41

Shapiro:

Well, I mostly have gone to the Africa-related ones, so probably the Comaroffs. It's partly their personalities and that they finish each other's sentences. They're two people with the energy of sixteen, and so they kind of—it wouldn't be right to say they suck up the oxygen in a room, but maybe they generate the oxygen in a room. So that's probably the one—I think I've seen them speak there more than once. Yeah, I'd say that.

01-00:09:25

Holmes:

There's no shortage of these kind of events, if you will, at Yale, but to have a program that brings in people on a weekly basis for nearly thirty years is pretty remarkable. How do you see that in comparison to some of the other

programs at Yale? I mean, I know each one has its distinct character and unique contributions, but at least when it was starting, was that really something novel on the university, to really want to bring in speakers week after week?

01-00:10:07

Shapiro:

Yeah. The closest thing to it that I was involved in for a very long time was the Southern Africa Research Program, which ran for about close to twenty years, mostly run by Leonard Thompson in the history department. It was a smaller version of the same thing, and it was focused on Southern Africa. It used to have six postdocs a year, and it was one of the few ways in which black African scholars could, all through the apartheid years, get a year at a place like Yale and then go back. If you look at black African intelligentsia in Southern Africa today, the number of them who went through that program is unprecedented. So in some ways parallel. It ended when apartheid ended because the foundations that were supporting it decided that they'd rather spend their money in Southern African than in the US *on* Southern Africa, which I think was shortsighted, because actually having Southern African scholars come here and go back as a way of building intellectual capital there. But it was also Leonard Thompson was retiring, and he was the creative energy. So it's not completely unprecedented, but I think on the scale that they've done Agrarian Studies, it's probably unprecedented, yeah.

01-00:11:49

Holmes:

You were talking about just some of the unique aspects that have really made the program successful over the years. To think about a program lasting for thirty years is, at least in my view, that's pretty uncommon. What do you see as really the keys to that success, of not just continuing for thirty years, but also keeping that vibrancy?

01-00:12:19

Shapiro:

Oh, I'm sure it's the scholarship. At the end of the day, we're a university, and the fish rots from the head: if you're not producing real scholarship, your half-life in a research university is going to be short. And if they were not producing first-rate books and articles in top journals and generation after generation of scholars who were getting jobs in first-rate universities, no program would survive at a place like Yale. Certainly no graduate program would survive at a place like Yale unless that was happening. That is the core mission. The MacMillan Center, which I ran for many years, has hundreds of events every year, but the programs that we continue to put money into are the ones that are producing scholarship.

01-00:13:18

Holmes:

In 2013, Agrarian Studies came under the umbrella of the MacMillan Center.

01-00:13:23

Shapiro:

Yeah.

01-00:13:24

Holmes:

You were the Henry R. Luce Director of the MacMillan Center for over a decade by that time. If you could, maybe discuss your decision to support the program and to give it a home in the MacMillan Center. I know probably as director of the MacMillan Center you see a lot of proposals, you see a lot of programs come and go. What made Agrarian Studies, in your view at that time, different?

01-00:13:49

Shapiro:

Well, those years were the years after the financial crisis. People think about the financial crisis as 2008, 2009, but the way university budgeting at Yale works, we have something called a smoothing rule, which basically means—you know, we're a nonprofit; we have to spend 5 percent of the value of our endowment every year to keep our nonprofit status. But the smoothing rule actually means we're spending 5 percent of the value of the endowment two years ago, so that you can do long-term planning and budgeting and so forth. So what that meant was Yale didn't really get hit by the financial crisis until about 2011—2011, '12, '13 fiscal years were when there was just this huge crunch. I mean, people knew it was going to be coming, but when it really hit there was a lot of financial reorganization of the university, there was a lot of the provost's office shedding programs to save money, and anything on soft money is the first thing that people look at. So the MacMillan Center is extremely well endowed, but we too, we were facing the same crunches—in fact, we were facing a bigger crunch because whereas about 33 percent of the university's operating budget comes from endowment income, over 90 percent of MacMillan's comes from endowment income, so we actually took a bigger hit than the university as a whole, and we had to cut a lot of things. And the university wanted us to pick up things because the provost was under pressure. So, we had to make, actually, a lot of hard calls. But picking up Agrarian Studies was an easy one because our central mission is research. What we tended to shed were these giant conferences that fill up all the hotels in New Haven for four days and cost, you know, \$60,000 to put on, but when you say three months later, "What was there?"—it's just like a Chinese dinner. People thought it was great at the time, but you're still hungry later. So we had to really decide what our priorities were and what we would support and what we wouldn't support, and we were very happy to pick up covering Agrarian Studies because it really is research based and producing top-quality published work.

01-00:16:55

Holmes:

Now, you've worked with Jim Scott, not just as a student, but also as a colleague for many years. What are some of your most memorable stories or observations that you'd like to share about Jim?

01-00:17:10

Shapiro:

Well, he's a contrarian guy. I don't think of any particular story so much, but the great thing about him is his passionate commitment to doing what he does well, and he puts his heart and soul into it. This program certainly would not

exist but for Jim Scott—which isn't to say that over the decades, there haven't been a lot of first-rate Yale faculty centrally involved in it, but the truth is most programs depend on the creative energy of one or two or a very small number of people if they're going to survive. That's the thing about him, his passionate commitment. He marches to his own drum. He doesn't care what the discipline thinks or says about what he's doing. I think it is one of the great things about political science, actually, that differentiates it from other disciplines, that you can swim against the tide and still get to the top. If you were as heterodox to the discipline as he is to political science in economics or in sociology, I don't think you would end up as a Sterling Professor. So it's an anarchic discipline, and that suits Jim. There's very little agreement on what to study or how to study it. There are fashions that come and go, and everybody gets excited, whether it's rational choice models or field experiments or big-N quantitative work. Things come and go, and there's often something that's sort of touted as the next big thing in political science, but the truth is it's an extremely diverse, anarchic discipline. If you're as creative as he is and as good a scholar and as good a writer as he is, you can actually become—I think it was Walker Evans who said something along the lines of doing fury honor is the best way to defuse it. So taking a contrarian person like Scott and saying, "You're the Sterling Professor of Political Science," it's not his self-image. I think he was quite taken aback when he was made a Sterling Professor, but it's nonetheless fitting.

01-00:20:47

Holmes:

What kind of legacy do you think Jim and the Agrarian Studies Program has left here at Yale? But also, I guess, not just here at Yale, but among those who have been affiliated with it around the world.

01-00:21:00

Shapiro:

Well, first of all, that intersecting zone between history, anthropology, and political science, is a fertile area for scholarship, and I think that will continue to be the case. I think it's going to change, because agriculture as we have known it is going to change. If you think about how food is going to be produced for the world fifty years from now, it's not going to be how it's being produced now in much of the world. And so I think the subject matter is going to change in ways that we have no real idea about. Life has more imagination than us, somebody once said. It's not a field that's going to look, fifty years from now, anything like it looks today, and it'll depend on whether there are creative people around at that time.

So, you know, legacies are tricky with academic programs. When I came here in 1978, Yale was at the absolute pinnacle of Latin American studies, and why? Because we had three incredibly creative professors, Carlos Diaz-Alejandro, Al Fishlow, and Al Stepan, in different disciplines—economics, political science, history and anthropology. And then one died and two left, and Latin American studies at Yale just fell through the floor for about a decade and a half. It was just not a place where there was much happening.

And now that's, for serendipitous reasons, actually turned itself around. A number of departments in the last decade have made really good appointments, so Latin American studies has come back.

So I'm a big believer in the proposition that just keeping programs going because there's a legacy is often a bad idea, because the next generation doesn't have the passion; maybe, the creative people move on to other things and the programs start to be run by hangers-on. I actually personally shut down the Southern Africa Research Program for that reason: I couldn't see the next generation who were going to put the kind of energy into it. I didn't want to watch it turn into a shadow of its past glory. And so it'll depend. It'll depend who—there are very creative people associated with the program who aren't retiring, but I don't know if it's going to turn out to be their passion. They may have other fish to fry. We'll find out.

01-00:24:24

Holmes:

Indeed. Ian, this has been great. I really appreciate your time. Any final thoughts before we wrap up?

01-00:24:31

Shapiro:

No, I mean, I think, as you have seen, my involvement has been from the periphery, but I've always been a cheerleader of the program. Yeah, I guess I would add one final thing: I think because political science tends to be swept by fads that many people think are turning over the discipline and it can be hegemonic for a time, one of the good things about Agrarian Studies is it's always been something of a home for heterodoxy, and I think that's a good thing.

01-00:25:15

Holmes:

Ian, thank you so much.

01-00:25:16

Shapiro:

You're welcome.

[End of Interview]