

Elisabeth Wood

*Elisabeth Wood: 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

This project was generously supported by the following organizations at Yale University:

Dean's Office, Faculty of Arts and Sciences  
The Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies  
The InterAsia Initiative  
Council on Southeast Asia Studies  
Program in Agrarian Studies

Since 1953 the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Elisabeth Wood dated November 6, 2019. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

For information regarding quoting, republishing, or otherwise using this transcript, please consult <http://ucblib.link/OHC-rights>.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Elisabeth Wood, "Elisabeth Wood: Reflections on James C. Scott and the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University" conducted by Todd Holmes in 2019, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2021.



Elisabeth Wood

**Abstract**

Elisabeth Jean Wood is the Crosby Professor of the Human Environment and professor of political science, international and area studies at Yale University. As of fall 2020, she is also the co-director of the Agrarian Studies Program. In this interview, Wood discusses her introduction to James C. Scott's work during graduate school and its impact on her own work; the role the Agrarian Studies Program played in her decision to come to Yale as a faculty member; the unique intellectual space of the program's colloquium and its impact on students and faculty alike; the program's interdisciplinary aspects and its larger impact in the academy; the creation of community; and hopes for the program's future.

**Table of Contents**

Project history	vi
Interview 1: November 6, 2019	
Hour 1	1
Challenges of political environment in Los Alamos, New Mexico — Transition from physics at the University of California, Berkeley to Latin American studies in graduate school, field research in El Salvador — Introduction to James C. Scott during graduate school, influence of Scott's work — Reasons for choosing Yale University, influence of the Program in Agrarian Studies — Involvement in and benefits of the program — Distinguishing scholarly aspect of the program's colloquium — Program's similarity to Michael Watts' colloquium on peasant studies at UC Berkeley — Sense of community at Scott's farm dinners — Interdisciplinary aspect of the program — Intellectual impact of the program — Impact of Scott's teaching and mentoring — Program's impact in academia, creation of widespread community — Hopes for the program's future	

## 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 6, 2019

01-00:00:00

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is November 6, 2019, and I have the pleasure of sitting down with Elisabeth Wood, professor of political science here at Yale University. And we are here in her office in the political science department on campus at Yale in the beautiful city of New Haven, Connecticut. Libby, thank you so much for taking the time. I know your schedule is packed, you're very busy, and I really appreciate you sitting down to talk about Jim Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program.

01-00:00:39

Wood:

Really, it's my pleasure. It's one of the most formative parts of my intellectual life—Jim Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program—so I'm delighted to do it.

01-00:00:50

Holmes:

Well, before we talk about Jim and the program, maybe tell us a little bit about yourself and your road here to Yale.

01-00:00:57

Wood:

I grew up in Los Alamos, New Mexico, which is the city that first developed atomic weapons, and that meant I grew up in the shadow of political violence. And it was also a very gendered place with a particular kind of status hierarchy. If you wanted to be an intellectual, you needed to study physics and mathematics, seen as a particular challenge for girls and women. So that laid out a compelling challenge, and moreover I grew to love the mathematics and physics that I learned as an undergraduate and later as a doctoral student.

But I also along the way had the very formative experience of living in Peru with a group of very radical Peruvian nuns. I just learned an incredible amount from them about really compelling questions in our world. And so when I picked up my admissions to the physics program at UC Berkeley, I volunteered to go into the jails in Oakland and San Francisco with an attorney. This is the early 1980s. We were looking for detainees who would have a credible political asylum claim from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala—those were the main countries. I became deeply engaged in the stories that they told about the suffering they and their families and communities endured during the conflicts there, and the very painful decisions to leave. And this was in such contrast to US policy in the region. As I became very engaged in the solidarity movement against US policy, this nexus of activism and violence became ever more compelling to me, and so I switched from physics and math into the social sciences. And I did that via an MA program in Latin American studies where I studied the thing that I had the tools to study, which was economics, principally development economics.

But I also took a course with Michael Watts in the geography department, his incredibly influential, formative, well-known course simply called Peasants. That was foundational for my emergent understanding about what was going on in Central America. First for my MA and then doctoral studies, I did extensive field research in El Salvador. That set me on this particular academic path—a bit unusual in political science for an emphasis on ethnography rather than other methods of social science. I first went to NYU, and then this opportunity came along at Yale, and that's when I first met Jim.

01-00:04:03

Holmes:

Well, tell us a little bit about your first experience of meeting Jim. Did you come across his work during graduate school?

01-00:04:08

Wood:

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, of course.

01-00:04:11

Holmes:

I mean, it's hard not to, right, and particularly for a social scientist doing fieldwork. At that time he was really one of the few political scientists who still used those methods, it seemed.

01-00:04:27

Wood:

Yeah, not just method, but also looking at the conditions under which subordinate peoples can exercise different kinds of agency. I first read *The Moral Economy [of the Peasant]*, later then *Weapons of the Weak*, and these were just formative for my understanding of rural society in El Salvador as it was undergoing this incredible transformation. So I knew a lot of his work very well, and when I met him it was just a wonderful experience. Sometimes when we meet people whose work we so admire and respect, sometimes we're a little disappointed; that was not the case! And so it was in the context, actually, of my visit to Yale to explore whether I would come to Yale that I met him. We went for coffee. I still remember that coffee very well.

01-00:05:29

Holmes:

Was that one of the things that really attracted you—I mean, there's a lot of things that are attractive about Yale, but the chance to work with Jim Scott?

01-00:05:35

Wood:

The chance to work with Jim, and because I had heard about the Agrarian Studies Program when I was doing work at Berkeley with Michael Watts in the geography department, I knew a bit about the program. And the attractions were not just the broad topic but also the interdisciplinary nature of the program. My experience at NYU had become difficult because the department was becoming more narrow. My students were increasingly being told that field research was journalism—let journalists do that; we can then draw on their work and do proper social science analysis or modeling of different kinds and so on. So the idea of coming to a place like Yale with these interdisciplinary programs, principally Agrarian Studies, but also the political science department, which has a very long history and ongoing

commitment to diversity of topics and of methods and also to working on things that really matter. All of that was very attractive.

01-00:06:49

Holmes:

Well, you mentioned the Agrarian Studies Program. Discuss your involvement in it and how you got involved.

01-00:06:54

Wood:

I've attended the colloquium off and on since I've been here. Some years it's been more possible than others, of course. I have taught the doctoral course, Agrarian Societies, with Jim, sometimes with other faculty colleagues. And lately I've been also involved with selecting the postdoctoral fellows, which is the third component of the program. It's been wonderful. Teaching the course is a real challenge, because it's taught by three faculty members. We come from very different engagements with the vast topic of agrarian societies. I mean, that can mean so many things. We come from different disciplines, methodological approaches. So you find yourself reading wonderful works that you would probably not have read otherwise, and you learn so much. As an intellectual space to continue to grow, it's a fantastic program, both the course and then, of course, the colloquium, which brings in cutting-edge scholars doing this great diversity of work as well. So that and the interdisciplinarity of the whole program. But thinking about the course in particular—it draws students from forestry and environmental studies, history, anthropology, sociology, political science, sometimes public health, and some of the area studies MA programs. Having conversations about these challenging works with the students taking the course is just a wonderful space to learn and grow myself.

01-00:08:56

Holmes:

Many who have taught the seminar say the same thing about what an amazing experience it is. And many also say the colloquium is almost an extension of that, because here you get it on almost a bigger scale—every week, a speaker coming in from anywhere in the US or the world. Discuss your experience with the colloquium a little bit.

01-00:09:24

Wood:

Yeah. What I love about the colloquium is that it is such a constructive space. Everybody reads some work by—let's call the person the speaker, but the speaker is, of course, silenced for a good hour. And in that hour, almost everybody in the room, in accordance with norms of constructive intellectual and social and political engagement, offers commentary—sometimes appreciative, about "What I really learned from this," and of course then moving into how it could be strengthened, what's missing. And it's all towards taking this work to another level, really making it reach the audience that it deserves. And that feeling of being in a place where truly scholarly intellectual work is being done—which sadly, doesn't happen all that often in the academy—that's what's special about it.

01-00:10:34

Holmes:

At UC Berkeley, Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts created a similar colloquium based on Agrarian Studies, which I believe was on the political environment. Did you have any interaction with that?

01-00:10:46

Wood:

I think that was after my time there.

01-00:10:48

Holmes:

Okay.

01-00:10:49

Wood:

I was there '86 to '88. Michael was there, and his peasant seminar was similar in that it drew doctoral students from around the university. And it was big. It was a seminar, but there were thirty people there, thirty people taking it incredibly seriously, and, you know, although it had the usual two-hour slot, we often went well past the supposed ending time of class. And some of the colleagues that I met in that seminar remain among the people I most admire and respect. So it was a kind of a prelude to, for me, the later formative experience of being here in Agrarian Studies.

01-00:11:41

Holmes:

Libby, you've talked about the three components of the program. We're looking at the colloquium, we're looking at the seminar, and then also the fellows program that creates this dynamic environment. But then all of this is not just here at Yale; a lot of it also gets transferred to Jim's farm—the dinners. Talk a little bit about your experience, or maybe memorable events that strike you about the dinners at Jim's farm.

01-00:12:09

Wood:

Again, it's much in the same vein. There's not a lot of small talk around that table; there's serious conversation about things that people care about, are working on, issues of the day. He brings together people he wants to talk to, and as a result, everybody wants to have a serious conversation. And it is just a wonderful experience—kind of a capstone, if you like, to the Agrarian Studies Program—to say nothing of that Jim's an incredible cook, as you know. So there's always that pleasure. Often very locally produced, sometimes, for example, his very own chicken. So it's, I think, particularly for the postdocs, it's a core part of the program, as is the lunch after the colloquium. There's a sense of building community across these disciplines and across time. One of the great achievements, I think, of the program is the network of scholars around the world who continue to engage in very cutting-edge research and also sometimes policy built on their experience here in the program.

01-00:13:42

Holmes:

Now, you've seen probably a lot of programs in your academic career, been involved in a lot of programs. What do you think are some of the unique

aspects about the Agrarian Studies Program? You've hit on some of these, but vis-à-vis other programs you may have encountered in your career.

01-00:14:00

Wood:

I think for me the abiding uniqueness and what makes it so special and important is this ignoring disciplinary boundaries. When we are there, sitting around that table, we were all peers struggling to deeply understand something important about the world. And in the hierarchical spaces of the university where we live in such disciplinary silos, that's really important. And the issues that we discuss are also really important. And the seriousness with which people recognize both of those—and the norms set by Jim over these years and reinforced by everybody around the table—is that therefore we need to be really constructive. So I think that's what makes it so powerful. The only kind of intellectual space that I used to attend regularly when I was at NYU was Chuck Tilly's [Charles P. Tilly] ongoing seminar. That was in some ways not as focused on the topics I care deeply about, but in similar ways also constructive, drawing people from many disciplines, and also, you know, let's not waste our time on topics that don't matter.

01-00:15:41

Holmes:

Agrarian Studies is approaching thirty years. There are not many programs in academia that can really survive that long. What do you see as the keys to the program's success to reach thirty years?

01-00:16:05

Wood:

I hate to repeat myself, but I think the answer's the same. So many of us value those characteristics of an intellectual space, whether it's the colloquium or the course or just interacting with postdocs and the graduate students attracted to that space and so on. I think that's what drives its success, its kind of enduring importance to many of us, the legacy for a lot of scholars who've come through the program in one of these roles. And of course I don't want to neglect to say Jim's a very charismatic scholar and person, and I think that also has made a difference for people. To sit down with Jim, visiting on campus or in the course of your doctoral course here, and have a serious conversation with him about your work is just very impactful.

01-00:17:12

Holmes:

Speaking of Jim, you've worked with Jim now for about fifteen years.

01-00:17:15

Wood:

Yeah, yeah.

01-00:17:17

Holmes:

What are some of your most memorable stories or observations you'd like to share about Jim?

01-00:17:23

Wood:

I think an important engagement from me is as a much less experienced faculty member, just watching the way he teaches and the way he convenes

the colloquium—and around the dinner table. So how do you build an intellectual community with that kind of engagement? That has been a kind of abiding, ongoing, I would say, learning experience for me. So it's not any particular instance that I'm thinking of, but just reflecting on these fifteen years. That's what I want to emphasize. Of course, also I've learned a lot from him for my own work, whether it's my lectures in the class or when we've sat down to discuss my work. So I would say it's both learning from him as a scholar, but I really want to emphasize his teaching and mentoring.

01-00:18:34

Holmes:

What kind of legacy do you think that Jim and the program have left? Here at Yale, but as we've also discussed, across the world, and that network of scholars.

01-00:18:45

Wood:

I guess first I would say there's dozens of books that are deeply informed by the program in one way or another, so in terms of contribution to knowledge, our primary engagement as scholars, so I would emphasize that. Second, the network you just mentioned, the ways in which people continue to draw on each other's work, their experiences here, a sense that there is this far-flung community of people working on Agrarian Studies. That would be also very important. And then I think each of us also has our own particular experience that informs our work in quite specific ways. So I would say all of that, yeah.

01-00:19:45

Holmes:

What are your hopes for the program here in the future?

01-00:19:48

Wood:

I hope we carry on for another thirty years, I think is the most important thing to say. I think, as I mentioned, it remains for many of us this very important space. We don't—if I can speak for others as well—we don't want to lose that, and so that means continuing to engage and build out. I think one important thing that we're already doing, and we need to do ever more deeply, is to engage with the climate emergency and its implications for agrarian society. So I think that is an important way in which the program is evolving and speaks to the need for another thirty years.

01-00:20:45

Holmes:

Libby, this has been wonderful. Again, I thank you so much for your time to sit down and talk today. Any final thoughts before I let you get back to work?

01-00:20:56

Wood:

Listen, thanks very much for doing this. I can't wait to see what Jim himself says in his oral history and what all these colleagues have said. It's a great project, and thanks for doing it.

01-00:21:07

Holmes:

All right. Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]