

Shivi K. Sivaramakrishnan

*Shivi K. Sivaramakrishnan: 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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Shivi K. Sivaramakrishnan

Abstract

K. Sivaramakrishnan is the Dinakar Singh Professor of India & South Asia Studies in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University. He is also co-director of the Program in Agrarian Studies. When it comes to affiliates of the program, "Shivi," as he is commonly known, has perhaps the longest and most storied career. He was a graduate student in the inaugural class of the Agrarian Societies seminar, and he was then selected to become the first graduate assistant of the Agrarian Studies Program. In that capacity, he worked with James C. Scott, Kay Mansfield, Helen Siu, and others to craft the signature program that still operates today. In the years that followed, his involvement with the program continued to evolve. He was a postdoctoral fellow, and he later came back to present at the program's Friday colloquium. When he returned to Yale as a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology, he joined Scott as program co-director, a capacity in which he still serves. In this interview, Shivi recounts the first Agrarian Societies seminar and the experience of setting up a new program; the impact Scott and Agrarian Studies has had on him as a scholar; the larger influence the program has had on two generations of scholarship; and how the program has evolved over the years and his hopes for the future.

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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: September 25, 2018

01-00:00:04

Holmes: I'll go ahead and slate this. All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 25, 2018. I have the privilege of sitting down with K. Sivaramakrishnan, also known as Shivi, professor of anthropology here at Yale University. This is for the Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, and we are at his office here in the beautiful city of New Haven at Yale University. Shivi, thanks so much for sitting down with me.

01-00:00:35

Sivaramakrishnan: Thank you. It's my pleasure.

01-00:00:48

Holmes: Shivi, we want to talk about your experience with the Agrarian Studies Program, and related interests, but maybe to start, tell us a little about yourself and how you came here to Yale.

01-00:01:03

Sivaramakrishnan: I came to Yale as a graduate student, initially, in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, to do a master's in environmental studies. By that time, I had already been working in the government of India for about eight years, in a very elite branch of the civil services, and had begun to specialize in rural development and forest management, especially forest management with an attention to social and distributive justice concerns, and was actually involved in the original creation and initial structure of the Ministry of Environment and Forest in the Government of India. It was a very exciting time in India back then, in the mid-to-late-1980s. That's what led me to think I really wanted to get deeper into these topics more as a research scholar than as a policy professional, and the Yale Forestry School seemed the obvious place to go for that. I had the good fortune to get the opportunity—the admission and the funding—to be able to do that. That's how I arrived at Yale.

01-00:02:26

Holmes: What year was that?

01-00:02:27

Sivaramakrishnan: 1989.

01-00:02:29

Holmes: Why don't you tell us a little bit about your involvement in Agrarian Studies? Maybe a first way to do that is tell us how you first met Jim Scott.

01-00:02:42

Sivaramakrishnan: It wasn't very much longer after I got to New Haven, because a very close friend of mine, Ramachandra Guha, who is one of the pioneers in forestry and environmental history of South Asia—we were classmates in college and closest of friends—he ended up doing that work right out of college, while I

was in my government service career. He had spent a year at Yale in the late 1980s, as a visiting scholar, right after he got his PhD, and had met Jim Scott, and gotten to know him well, and admired him and his work. When he realized I was going to Yale, a couple of years after he had been there, he said, "When you get there, you must meet this person, Jim Scott," whose work I had, at that point, not yet read. So I took his advice, and towards the end of 1989, a few months after I had started here, I made an appointment and met Jim Scott, saying, "I'm here because a friend of mine said I should meet you." He fondly remembered my friend, who, by then, was a good friend of his, too. This was November, December, maybe, of 1989. That's when he also mentioned that he was about to teach, for the first time ever, this new, innovative course called Graduate Seminar in the Comparative Study of Agrarian Societies. I thought, well, this is something that I definitely want to learn more about, so I signed up for that course, which was taught for the first time ever in spring semester, 1990.

01-00:04:22

Holmes:

Tell us a little bit about that course. By that time, you've had a few graduate courses, right? What really struck you about the uniqueness of that experience?

01-00:04:37

Sivaramakrishnan:

See, for me, to remember, I'm coming back to graduate school after about a decade of working, and I've spent a semester in the forestry school, where a lot of my coursework has been oriented towards either the natural sciences, or towards policy and law. But even in that short period of time, I began to think, I really want to approach some of these bigger questions around environmental conservation and management with a deeper understanding of both historical and cultural issues. The graduate seminar in Agrarian Studies that was being offered seemed to offer something like that, because, first of all, it said it was about history, culture, and power, taken together. It was about agrarian societies around the world, and dealing with a vast historical period. It was not restricted to the most contemporary issues. The other unique thing about it, of course, was that—which I wouldn't have known that it was that unique at that time, but I came to realize that subsequently—it was actually taught by four instructors. It met for like five hours every week, starting in the afternoon, when it would still be daylight, and ending at dusk, especially in the early part when it was winter and the night came early. It was an unforgettable experience. There were 59 or 58 of us. When we broke into two groups, it was still 27, 28 in each group. Each group would be led by two of the instructors. That was a unique experience, and I realized how unique it was only when I finished graduate school. I never again got a chance to take a course remotely like that.

01-00:06:37

Holmes:

Who were the instructors for that first seminar?

01-00:06:39

Sivaramakrishnan: Jim Scott, of course, and Professor Robert Harms, the African historian, John Wargo from the School of Forestry, and Helen Siu from anthropology. So you had four different disciplines of people who work in different parts of the world, and had different kinds of expertise. What brought them together was this desire to jointly work on this topic of the comparative study of agrarian societies in the world.

01-00:07:11

Holmes: The Program in Agrarian Studies officially began about a year and a half after that, I believe, in the fall of 1991.

01-00:07:21

Sivaramakrishnan: That's right.

01-00:07:22

Holmes: You're still a graduate student here, on the ground, connected with the principal actors who were making this happen. Maybe tell us a little bit about that experience, and what you observed.

01-00:07:38

Sivaramakrishnan: It was, again, a unique opportunity. All I can think of is, within the space of seven to eight years, this was my second chance to be on the ground, observing the start of something major. What I mean is, in the mid-1980s, I was doing that in India, with the setting up of the Ministry of Environment and Forest, the government's first major effort to make policy for nature conservation and environmental management. Here I was, maybe not on quite that scale, getting involved in the setting up of a unique, interdisciplinary program of research and education. Of course, the seminar was taught in the spring. It had this historic enrollment, which I think has never been overtaken by any graduate seminar taught at Yale since, not even that very course. During that first half of '90, and the latter part of '90, especially, it became clear that this would soon be more than a course, because there had been a lot of interest in this kind of an interdisciplinary program at various foundations, and Jim had been invited to submit some kind of a proposal, which he had done. By late fall of 1990, it became clear that both Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation would actually support it, so it could go into effect. Therefore, in early spring of '91, the process of setting up an office, hiring Kay Mansfield to be the first, and as we learned later, the only program manager who was a senior staff person, had begun, and they were looking to hire at least one, maybe two, students to start working with the program as well. There was probably a pool of interested students, given there had been so many in the course. I must have made a favorable impression on some of the instructors, because they very quickly asked me if I wanted to join the team, and I gladly accepted. By the summer of 1991, I had started to work with the program. Again, we were setting things up from scratch.

Here, I must say that one of the remarkable things about this experience is Jim Scott's own attitude, because he had a group of dedicated and interesting faculty, who were obviously on his team already. They taught the course with him, they were involved in discussing with him the elements of the proposal that he ultimately submitted and got the funding for. But he didn't stop with consulting them. He brought me on as the student employee, officially, but involved me in everything to do with the planning and development of the program itself. What would be the elements? There would be a postdoc program. There would be an ongoing graduate instruction element through the seminar. There would be weekly colloquia, and how would they be run? What would be their design? What kind of people would we invite to those? How would the colloquium actually take place? Over two or three hours, what would be the format? All of this was up for discussion, and as the neophyte student employee, I was in those discussions, and contributed in a small way, perhaps, to shaping those outcomes. At the end of that discussion, as the fall began, we were in place with a weekly colloquium, a graduate seminar, and a postdoc competition that had been, basically, announced. It was Jim's generosity, as a leader of the program, to feel that not just his faculty colleagues, but the student, the staff member, everybody, had something to offer, and we all helped craft what ultimately became this signature program that we still have in place.

01-00:11:43

Holmes:

I wanted to ask you a little bit about Kay Mansfield. In a couple of Jim's publications, especially, I believe, in the ten-year anniversary of the program, he did an edited collection, some papers, and he dedicated it to Kay, calling her largely the heart of the program. Discuss that a little bit.

01-00:12:03

Sivaramakrishnan: I'm glad to do that. I think it is not hyperbole at all to say Kay was the heart of the program. As I said, she not only came in as the manager of the program and did that very ably, which included designing and implementing the budget, our dealings with the administration, all the human resources-related activities for hiring the postdocs and the student workers, and finding our space, making sure our space was well-equipped with computers and furniture and things like that, but that, any effective business manager does, which she certainly did, and did very well. But I think, when you say she was the heart of the program, it is because she was such a welcoming presence in that office, and she made sure of every little detail that would make our incoming postdocs, especially, feel comfortable and happy while they were there. As you probably well know, a postdoc is always in a kind of liminal position in a university. They come, usually, from somewhere else, and they leave shortly after they arrive, in a year or two. They don't have an obvious affiliation, with a department, especially if they are part of an interdisciplinary program like this. They could easily be invisible, and also feel somewhat disoriented in this vast university, where everyone is frightfully busy doing what they have to do. Somebody like Kay, who makes

sure that they very quickly feel at home, that they can feel connected with the new colleagues and peers they want to meet, that they feel they are an integral part of this humming university, and not some visitors who are on the fringes of the life of the university, is no small achievement, and that's what she did, year after year, tirelessly. Welcoming the new group, making sure they could do stuff together and get to know each other, making sure they could meet other people at the university whom they needed to meet or wanted to meet, and generally feel completely at home. She went beyond anything reasonably you might expect. She would have them home for meals. She would look at especially the visitors who were from abroad, and see that they were introduced to various things that they may be unfamiliar with.

She would always have, just to give a small example, a Thanksgiving dinner, which of course included her own family, but she would make sure that she was checking to see which of the postdocs was lacking a place to go, and very quietly, without appearing to be patronizing or anything, she would invite them home for Thanksgiving dinner. This way, somebody visiting from Africa, or somebody visiting from Asia, who didn't, perhaps, even know much about Thanksgiving as a holiday, and certainly had nowhere to go, would not only have somewhere to go, they'd learn something about a great American tradition, but they'd have a wonderful holiday. Kay and her family would go out of their way to make them feel welcome in that way. Similarly, when these postdocs came with their families, she would go the extra distance to make sure they had proper support for their children. If they had people to be admitted to schools on their way in, she would help them with school admissions. If they needed certain kinds of furniture, she'd make sure that she could help them find it. So there were all kinds of things she would do. And being a very, very accomplished editor, she would often be editing their manuscripts for them, and sometimes she wouldn't even charge her full fees if she felt they couldn't afford it. They would leave here not just with finished writing projects, but writing projects that had been expertly edited, perhaps at a bargain.

01-00:16:22

Holmes:

Shivi, I wanted to ask about the colloquium. Everyone usually observes how unique the Agrarian Studies colloquium is, and especially accomplished scholars who have been to many colloquia, around the world, even. Discuss, as both one who was there on the ground floor as a graduate student setting it up, but then as one who comes back to Yale, which I want to get to here in a minute, and eventually becomes the co-director of the same program. Discuss your thoughts on the uniqueness of the colloquium.

01-00:17:01

Sivaramakrishnan: This colloquium, as Jim will be the first to tell you, is not completely original in its design. He found the elements being practiced elsewhere in Princeton, I think it was, or Wisconsin. He sometimes attributes certain things to Princeton, and certain things to Wisconsin, but either way, he didn't

completely invent it. But I think it was unique to what was happening here. It wasn't being done very many other places, and what I'm referring to is the format, whereby a paper is sent a couple of weeks in advance, a discussant is appointed, who's often a graduate student, but not always, whose work bears little relation to the work that is to be discussed, forcing—almost ensuring—that there will be a conversation which will not be among two specialists in the same field. The author of the paper is kept silent for the first hour of the colloquium, so that it ensures that those present in the room who have read the paper can share their thoughts about the paper they have read, with a group of people who already represent a variety of fields, a variety of interests, and all they share in common is the fact that they happen to have read the paper. There's a discussant who has, again, provided some initial comments, but almost certainly not from a perspective of somebody who knows the topic of the paper or the discipline of the paper extremely well. So it sets in motion a wide-ranging discussion, and that tenor is then easier to maintain, because that's what we've been having for an hour by the time the author of the paper is actually allowed to speak.

The other thing that I think is unique about it is, when the author begins to speak—and this is where, I suppose, Jim Scott's expert moderation began to play a role—the author will be directed gently towards those topics and questions which, again, maintain a broad, comparative, interdisciplinary flavor to the discussions, rather than getting into the weeds of particular sources, particular theoretical formulations, and particular idiosyncrasies of the way a field has developed in terms of its own research history. There, the contribution is as much that of the person moderating, which is something I learned from the ground up, having been involved from the very beginning. I think the third element I would say about the colloquium—and this unique quality has remained with us—is that I see it as a colloquium where people of very diverse points of view come together, people who have, perhaps, vehement disagreements with what the author has presented in the room. But the discussion always proceeds in a friendly manner. People can be quite direct in sharing their disagreements, but never in a way that quells further discussion. And that's also thanks to Jim Scott. In the early years, when Jim used to moderate all the sessions, one of things I saw him do quite well is deflect discussions which were maybe getting a little too pointed and a little antagonistic. That way we can really talk about the wonderful ideas that we can share, and get into more deeply, rather than finding fault with particular approaches, or pointing out little errors in data or analysis, which can happen very easily in a seminar or colloquium

That also meant that people like to come back, because they always felt they learned something. Either it was a new perspective, or it was some new material. It always happened in this kind of positive, inclusive, friendly, but at the same time, no-holds-barred kind of atmosphere, where people were not hesitant to say they didn't like something or didn't agree with it, but did it in a way that did not squelch argument, or make people feel small or dismissed.

That is not an easy skill, because academic seminars can be quite cut and thrust, in ways that people are trying to score points, but it doesn't generate fruitful outcomes, necessarily. I think that spirit of engagement is something that has been unique throughout, and we have managed to maintain that spirit after almost twenty-seven, twenty-eight years.

01-00:22:04

Holmes:

Shivi, talk a little bit about coming back to Yale. You left as a graduate student, as most do, but then came back to work with Jim as a colleague and eventually the co-director of the very program that you help him set up. Talk about that journey and experience.

01-00:22:34

Sivaramakrishnan: Yeah, it's a unique experience, and I'm very fortunate to have had it. I value and treasure it all the time. I also had the good fortune of going through some intermediate steps, which is to say I started there, as we've already discussed, as the first student employee, back in '91, a job which I continued for a couple of years initially, then on my return from my extended dissertation field research for about a year later, towards the end of my graduate career. Then I had the good fortune to be selected as one of the postdocs, so I spent a year being one of their program's postdocs in the late 1990s. A few years later, by which time I had moved to a job at the University of Washington in Seattle, I was invited back to give one of the Friday colloquia as a visitor. So I got to experience the coming to Yale from somewhere else, to take part in the Friday colloquium, as I had seen so many people do in the previous decade. That was in 2000. Then, finally, of course, in 2006, Yale hired me as a professor in anthropology, with an appointment in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. In 2007, Jim Scott said, "Will you join me in directing this program?" and become his co-director, and I said of course. So in 2008, I officially became the co-director. I've now served in that capacity for ten years. Now I've had an opportunity to experience the program from that perspective, and also to lead it through its further development and continuation in the last decade. That has been a pretty unique journey that, in a sense, runs parallel to my own journey as an academic and a scholar, because it coincides with the very beginning of my academic life as a first-year PhD student, and has continued thus far in what is almost my twenty-ninth year as an academic, now as a professor at Yale over the last decade or more.

01-00:24:58

Holmes:

In that experience, maybe discuss with us what kind of impact Agrarian Studies has had on you as a scholar.

01-00:25:08

Sivaramakrishnan: Oh, it's been a profound impact, and it's hard to summarize this easily. To go back to what I said earlier in this interview, I discovered fairly early in my graduate career that my interests lay in both comparative and interdisciplinary research and writing. Agrarian Studies became the

unparalleled venue to develop those interests and hone those skills. It allowed me to become the kind of creative, comparative, interdisciplinary thinker that I hope I have become, in good measure, from the very beginning. In that sense, the influence is formative. It also meant that I found many ways to think about the connections between these fields, that were long established before I became a scholar myself, fields like peasant studies, and how they transformed into something called agrarian studies, and how they, in turn, interacted with other emerging fields, like something like food studies at one end, or environmental studies at the other, and a variety of both more sort of quantitative and scientific approaches to the study of agriculture, to the much more humanistic and cultural studies of rural landscapes, and rural livelihoods, and farm cultures.

I just felt I was constantly expanding my horizon, to think about all the things we can learn about and write about under this very capacious rubric of agrarian studies, and in part helped by the fact that we had such scholars visiting us, both in the colloquium and as postdocs: art historians, scholars of literature, and of course the staple, historians, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, occasionally human geographers, but also the occasional person who was a development studies person, or a professional active in these fields, in a more applied sense. In the early years, we also used to recruit—at least once in a while, every two or three years—a figure we assumed was a public intellectual, who would be somebody who was not an academic, but wrote and taught interesting things about agrarian life and agrarian society. So even through the postdoc program, we always had at least one person who was a public intellectual, not a conventional academic. Could be a journalist, could be an activist, could be a scientist. That interface between scholarly endeavor and working in the real world around these issues was always maintained through the program, as you know, by inviting farmers to be part of the colloquium, or cheese-makers, or artists, and so on. The point is that over the 28 years or so that I've had the good fortune to be involved with this program from its very inception, there's never been a dull moment. There's always been an ever-widening of my own intellectual horizons through the work I do with and in the program.

01-00:28:50

Holmes:

You've been with the program, again, like you said, since its inception. Maybe share some of the memorable events that you've seen, that the program has been involved in?

01-00:29:03

Sivaramakrishnan: There are probably too many to discuss. I'd like to talk about what a simple and stable structure to the program actually enabled, in terms of a very diverse range of things that the program did. What I mean by that is, as you know, from the beginning until now, the program is basically the same three or so activities. It's the weekly colloquium on Fridays, it's the postdoctoral program, it's the graduate seminar that's taught every year by a team of

faculty. And, of course, along the way, for many years, it included a small grants program for graduate students to do some usually pre-dissertation research, to find out what they really wanted to work on—that program, sadly, is no more—and a series of books published by Yale University Press, under the broad rubric of agrarian studies, and has remained these things. It has never seriously changed from this basic structure. Some people might think such an unchanging structure can be limiting, but the opposite has been true. It's provided a certain core, predictable set of activities, which, in themselves, are capable of great diversity, because we bring in a very wide range of postdocs who do very wide-ranging things. The colloquium brings speakers from all walks of life, including non-academics, as we've discussed, and all manner of students come to the graduate seminar. For them, it becomes, in many cases—most cases, I would say—foundational to the way they think about their own research going forward.

But apart from that, because of the energy brought to it by Jim and the other faculty associated with the program, we've always found ways to help colleagues work together and generate new activities. What I mean by that is, it's been a great venue for people who might have never met before to get together, over the space of a few months, and hatch things that they've done together thereafter, whether it be conferences they organized together, or research projects they began and carried on for years thereafter together, or just stuff they wrote together, or new ways they decided to teach some of the courses they were teaching. These are all things that this program enabled. We just have to look at all the different books that people have written, having been postdocs over here, and one of the most common things they will tell you is that the book was a vastly different project in their minds before they got here, and turned out the way it did because of the year they spent here. It's because they were able to absorb all that was going on, which was not just these three or four stable activities, but also these other activities, the highlights usually being some extraordinarily unusual, capacious, and interesting conference. You've probably heard people talk about the famous Chicken Conference. That actually happened when I was away, during those years when I was working at the University of Washington, so I wasn't part of it. But I was part of that big tenth anniversary conference that we did in 2000, or 2001, and thereafter, the Food Sovereignty Conference, the Pig Conference, as it's popularly known, about the history of the pig from antiquity to the present around the globe.

Each of these has been a unique Agrarian Studies event, because it's brought together people from every imaginable walk of life to speak about the topics that the conference has addressed. Students, to very eminent senior scholars, to practitioners, to farmers, to activists and so forth, and has generated the most amazing conversations under the umbrella of Agrarian Studies, which has, I expect and I've seen, launched many interesting new projects. I think, institutionally, and structurally, simplicity and predictability at one level has enabled this kind of ranging free at another level, and allowing people, both

at Yale and away from Yale, to make connections that have then allowed them to do wonderful things together in the future. That's been one of the most amazing things I think Agrarian Studies has accomplished. We see the evidence of that in people's careers and their trajectories, in the work they have written, the research they have carried out by themselves or in collaborations they forged at Agrarian Studies, and so forth.

01-00:34:11

Holmes:

You were just talking about all the great things that have happened and developed under the large umbrella of Agrarian Studies. As one who's had that kind of view from beginning to now, how have you seen Agrarian Studies grow and evolve? This is very important for a program and center, particularly one that's encroaching on almost three decades.

01-00:34:38

Sivaramakrishnan: Right. That's a good question, Todd. It's not obvious to people that we've grown and evolved, because in some of the most visible ways, we've stayed the same. We still have a colloquium, which is still on the same format that we began with. We still have a postdoctoral program, which basically does the same thing, brings in a small group of people and lets them write what they're working in. We teach a graduate seminar, which still has the same title, and has the same format in terms of a group of three or four instructors, meets once a week for four hours, and mostly serves a bunch of PhD students across the campus, and a few master's students, and a small group, usually, of fearless undergraduates who dare to take such a challenging course. Looking at it superficially, I think this program hasn't really grown or changed, and I should add, even in terms of our self-described themes, we haven't changed a whole lot. We had peasant-state relations for a decade, and there has been cities and states, hinterlands and frontiers, for the next two decades, almost. People will look at it and say, "Oh, you've not really changed," but I think they would be missing the point, because, again, going back to the earlier point I was making, it's this simple elegance and apparent structural stability that has allowed us to be so flexible and able to absorb new ideas, and respond to them in creative ways so that we remain of great interest to people coming in here. Even perhaps reflecting the changes that have happened in the academy, or in the scholarly trajectories of one's disciplines, in their fields of inquiry and so forth, people still find Agrarian Studies a very productive, fruitful, generative venue in which to develop their own thinking and work.

What I mean by that is, going back to what we were discussing a bit earlier, Agrarian Studies—and you must have heard this from others—began very much with an interest in thinking through the rubric of peasant studies, which grew out of largely social history, to some extent economic history, and of course related fields in sociology, anthropology, political science, and development economics. That's where it began, and a lot of people saw this as perhaps, now, the cutting edge of peasant studies, but by the mid 1990s, even, and certainly by the late 1990s, peasant studies was being reshaped and

redesigned, and Agrarian Studies was part of that process as well, because we had already begun, in that first decade of our existence, to show the world that peasant studies had to escape from the somewhat iron grip of certain ways of looking at peasant studies, which were largely dominated by Marxist thought at the time. Cultural history on the one side, and comparative studies coming out of political economy, or the history of ideas, on the other side, were all important forces, and of course the ethnographic perspective coming from anthropologists doing work in agrarian societies was really important, too. All that had begun to reshape it. We were lucky in that we had called ourselves Agrarian Studies, and not the Center for Peasant Studies at Yale, so we could point to the fact that we were rebuilding and reshaping and redirecting peasant studies, but it didn't end there.

One of the remarkable things I noticed, having been involved from '91, continuously, until '97, when I left, is that already there was very interesting engagement between Agrarian Studies and these two emerging, exciting fields, food studies and environmental studies. In the spirit of being welcoming and inclusive, Agrarian Studies embraced those fields. If you look at who was coming here as a postdoc, and who were coming here to speak in the colloquium, you'll begin to see that shift in the programmatic evidence. More people writing about food, more people writing about environmental issues, were represented in what we were doing. That shift endures, in a sense. By 2000, that shift was in place, and as far as we can tell, the zeitgeist is still very much with food studies and environmental studies, and we are still very much in the mix over there. But we bring to it something I think some large parts of food studies and environmental studies lack, which is the deep, interdisciplinary, cultural and historical grounding that Agrarian Studies offers by looking at pre-modern conditions, but also the long history of trade, the long history of colonialism, and the various histories of the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and all the other things that we often—the study of slavery, for that matter—don't readily assume to be topics that are relevant to Agrarian Studies, but it reminds us, all the time, these topics are central to the study of agrarian societies, and therefore re-infuses, into fields like food studies and environmental studies, or cultural studies, that kind of a historical, comparative perspective, which sometimes they might lose sight of. And hence, reinvigorates those fields while it gets reinvigorated itself.

I think that's the way we've primarily grown and changed in terms of the scope of our intellectual engagements, which have seemed to be both welcoming and robust as new fields have emerged, some of which we've been able to show the connections that are fruitful, and make them. That's really why we have remained so exciting and relevant to people, and that is why, almost 30 years later, the graduate seminar is still heavily subscribed, and we still get tons of people wanting to come here and hang out and be part of the program in various ways, including in the postdoctoral program, but scholars who bring their own funding and want to be affiliated scholars, and

be here. We make an effort to see how we can be welcoming to them, but also how they can teach us about new directions in which we might want to go in the future, and be open in that way.

01-00:41:57

Holmes:

You discuss this simplistic and embracing structure as one of the keys to Agrarian Studies' success. What other aspects do you see that have contributed to the program's success over the decades?

01-00:42:28

Sivaramakrishnan: I think one of the most important things about our success is—and this is something I learned from Jim, because he used to talk about this in the early years, and we've done it together over the last decade. That is to resist the temptation to expand. There have been times, perhaps, when both the institutional support and the funding would have been available to become something larger or different, like the moment, almost ten years ago, when people were having discussions about deepening our relationship with, for instance, the Yale Sustainable Food Project, and coming up with some kind of center for agriculture, food, and the environment, which, at one level, was a very exciting notion. At the other level, it might have swallowed up this program, and this might have lost its initial identity. I think knowing that you do a certain set of things really well, and sticking with it, and not allowing various forces that operate upon us in a university setting to move us to becoming something else, was a strength. Again, it suggests that we are somewhat a stick in the mud, but actually, it goes to the old expression of, when something works, you don't want to alter it. We did show the adaptability and the flexibility to respond to changes in the field, broadly defined, and embrace them, and contribute to them in ways that people found meaningful and enriching, and hence, without changing too much, we were still always relevant. I think recognizing that, and thereby not becoming too ambitious or diffused in the way we thought about ourselves as an entity, as an organization, as a program, was, I think, very important. That's what I would stress in terms of continuing relevance, success, and continuing ability to inspire people to feel eager to engage.

01-00:44:58

Holmes:

During your time, you've seen the program face a number of challenges over the past three decades, usually around money and university support. Discuss some of that. Also, as the co-director, you get to actually speak of the hidden transcript that's also there, namely regarding Jim. As most know, Jim has a bit of an anarchist streak in him, and he's probably been challenging authority since he was three. Discuss that as well, the experience of working him, one who was a graduate mentor, but now as a colleague and a partner in the program. How have you both been able to address these challenges? Then you can also provide the tell-all on how he fights the administration.

01-00:45:51

Sivaramakrishnan: Thank you, Todd. This is going to be the fun part, I suppose. I remember when I had just started working as a student, and we had these external grants. We had money from Ford and Rockefeller. They expected us to periodically send them progress reports, and every couple of years or so, some big-shot from Ford or Rockefeller would show up and actually make a field visit, and spend a day with us, and visit the colloquium, and things like that. Because of my prior experience in government, my response to all this was to draft a detailed note saying, "These are the accomplishments. These are the things we're working on. These are some of the things we might need to do." The first time I did that, Jim just burst out laughing, and said, "That's wonderful. I'm so glad to have such a capable bureaucrat in the ranks, but I don't want to get these foundations in the habit of expecting these kinds of neatly prepared and polished reports every couple of years. That's the kind of bureaucratic burden I actually refuse to undertake, so we're not going to spoil them with this stuff. Let them come. Let them experience it directly. If they feel excited by what they've seen, they want to keep supporting us." It turned out to be a learning experience for me, because I did feel uncomfortable being somewhat, to my mind, unprepared for this kind of situation, but at least in those initial years, it worked like a charm, because these people would come, they'd sample more directly what we were doing, they'd talk to our postdocs, they'd attend a colloquium or two, they'd go to dinner at Jim's farm, which would always be a memorable event, and they'd go back feeling, "This is a humming place. It's really exciting. We should keep supporting it." They would really not press us for all these numbers and narrative accounts, other than the basic budget accounts that you're expected to send. So you could see, even in those very early years, I was merely the student worker, working in the program that my graduate advisor had set up, but our styles were very different. Jim appreciated my style, but his style prevailed. It seemed to work for a while.

In fact, when the foundations finally decided, as they inevitably do, this has been going on for ten years, and we never support things in perpetuity, so the university should recognize this is a gem, this is a jewel in the crown, and they need to be paying for it, we were fortunate in that the provost at the time, Alison Richard, who had formerly been chair of anthropology and head of the Peabody Museum, was a fan of the program, and a distinguished anthropologist herself of Africa, and was happy as provost to say, "Okay, it's time. You've proven your worth. We must support it." And so she did. But that did place us, then, in that position that is familiar to all programs which are supported by their own universities. When leaderships change, commitments can change. That's what began to happen. We began to get buffeted by those winds of change, because Alison was provost for a while, but when she left to become vice chancellor of Cambridge University in the UK, we had a series of provosts who didn't last very long. They moved onto greener pastures, perhaps. So every few years, we had a provost who would take a look and say, "What is this thing? Why are we supporting it to this

extent?" and we'd have to explain ourselves. I say this partly secondhand, because this was the period when I was gone, 1997 through 2006, when multiple provosts came and went, and each time, seemed to threaten the future of the program. I think it was Jim's stature, of course, as a scholar, but also his ability to go in and say, "What do you expect? What more do you expect?" People couldn't really point to what more to expect, and somehow the funding would be renewed, though one could see it being cut a little bit with each renewal as well.

This was the situation, in a sense, when I arrive and agree to become the co-director. The first thing I recognized was that, because Jim had been put into this kind of a bit of a defensive position with this rapidly changing leadership every two, three years, some basic elements had not been attended to. For instance, the salaries we paid the postdocs had not changed for almost fifteen years. I just felt, we can't do that. We can't bring in people here and pay them \$20,000 less per year than what they would get at a postdoc anywhere else. So we went in and renegotiated those salaries, and it was our good fortune the administration at the time was willing. That, of course, bumped up our budget. Initially, that did not seem to be a problem, and we were doing fine. But then the 2008 recession hit. The university was cutting all kinds of budgets, and sooner or later, a program like ours was also going to catch the eye of people who managed the university's finances, and so we did. Initially, all they did was to take away a couple of our postdocs, so that did reduce our budget again. But sooner or later, there was going to be a more fundamental investigation, I think, of the future of the program, and that began really in 2012, four years into the recession, and three years into a series of budget-cutting measures the university had been implementing by that time. I think the main step they took at the time, the president and the provost, is they set up a wide-ranging, large committee that was asked to review all postdoctoral programs, and recommend how to reorganize, ultimately, to sharply reduce, the number of postdoctoral programs the university was supporting.

Criteria that were established were, we must identify which programs are central to the mission of research and teaching, and which programs are more peripheral to that mission. That's a very broad kind of mandate, and everybody was trying to figure out how to see they were central to the mission of research and teaching. Unfortunately, I think such a statement was open to a very narrow interpretation, which would be, well, you are not central to teaching if your postdocs aren't actually teaching, and you're not central to research if your postdocs are not actually writing grants that support research on the Yale campus, which means more the STEM programs [science, technology, engineering, and math] working with their faculty sponsors, and bringing in big research grants, which are then housed at Yale, and earn Yale administrative fees and overheads. Now, Agrarian Studies didn't do any of those things. We brought in postdocs, we paid them a salary, and said, "Write your books, or your articles, or think about your new

research projects and what you want to do." So it was clear that we were likely to get identified as a luxury item.

That review was a turning point, I think, because we worked very hard. Todd, you're aware of some of these details, because you were part of that process. You were working in the program for some of that time. We basically had to help this review committee think about centrality in a more creative way. The fact that we did get renewed, even though with a slightly smaller budget, which meant we lost one more postdoc and we were down to three postdocs thereafter, starting in 2013, I think we did achieve that. The fact that they renewed us, at the cost of, at that point, one postdoc—we went from four to three—suggests that our effort to convince the leadership that creating a vital, interdisciplinary space, where visiting scholars and Yale-based scholars, students through faculty, could get together and collectively engage in the kind of creative writing and thinking and research that would advance their own work, but also advance various fields of inquiry, and ultimately build and solidify Yale's reputation as a place where such innovative thinking and writing happens, is central to our mission as one of the world's foremost research universities. I think that was a bit of an accomplishment, that we were able to get enough of that point of view across that they did not, like they did to some other programs, terminate us at that point, and actually allowed us to continue with a reduced budget.

That said, it was a very shoestring budget, and we had to find ways, by garnering support from other programs sometimes, to make sure that our colloquium continued to invite people we thought would be good to have, irrespective of where they were coming from, and therefore how much they would cost. We had to work a bit harder to collaborate with other programs, which, in itself, is not a bad thing. I think it's a good thing. It probably expanded our connections in the campus. It expanded our constituency, ultimately, so it probably was a good thing. But it also meant my approach of a lot more attention to details, being systematic, a lot more advanced planning, networking a lot more with key programs and key leadership at the university, came more into play. It was more required to keep the program at a level where it felt it was not likely to shrink any further. It coincides with a period when I think Jim Scott also was much more interested in spending more time away, doing his own work, and it worked well. Contrasting styles, perhaps, but very complimentary. The needs were somewhat different, and the qualities I brought, perhaps, were very salient to the situation we faced, and the kinds of challenges we faced, and the kinds of efforts we had to make, to both sustain the program, but also allow it to move in directions that would be fruitful and novel in some cases. That's what we accomplished, I would say, in the last decade, with somewhat diminished budgets, with some more skepticism on the part of new university leadership. But we're still here. People still find us attractive. They want to come to our classes. They want to come to our colloquium. The room still fills up with twenty-five, thirty, forty

people every Friday morning. I guess the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We are still here, and still thriving, despite those challenges.

To conclude that section, I will just say that last year was another turning point, because the renewal that was achieved in 2013, under those very adverse circumstances that I described earlier, came with the possibility that that might be the last renewal. It was clear the central leadership of the university was less and less willing to be a major financier of this program. We were concerned that it might well be the end of the program, but I think that decade of building relations across the university bore fruit, to some extent, and we were able to work with the MacMillan Center so that, since, basically, the summer of 2018, we are now a program of the MacMillan Center, and not a program supported from the central administration. I believe that has given the program a new lease of life, because it's a very appropriate home, it's a very vibrant home for such a program, because the MacMillan Center is all about creative, interdisciplinary, comparative, international programming, which is largely directed towards research, teaching, and postdoctoral scholarship, and that's what we do. I think we found a great new home, and prospects look good now, as long as the MacMillan Center renews its own commitments, which I think will happen, as long as we keep doing what we do well, which I hope we will continue to do.

01-01:00:28

Holmes:

Your experience and relationship with Jim is not what most have had. Most only know him as a colleague or a friend. Some know him as a graduate mentor. You've known him all the above. Thus, you most likely have, in your memory, some of the most memorable moment of Jim Scott. Why don't you share some of those for the record?

01-01:00:57

Sivaramakrishnan: Okay. I already remarked on one of the most important characteristics of the program, is his sort of infectious enthusiasm for all kinds of things. As you know, Jim saw himself not just as a scholar and a mentor to students, and a very gifted teacher as well for undergraduates, but as a farmer, as an anarchist thinker, as somebody who was always willing to join the fray when it came to fighting against some injustice or some cause that he believed was worthy. So he lived a very wide-ranging and energetic life, both inside and outside the university, and he was also amazingly hospitable to all kinds of people: students, staff, visiting colleagues, colleagues at the university, other researchers. Anybody visiting, especially a foreign student or scholar, who would want to see him, they would get ample time from him. If they continued to be involved in anything he was doing, very soon they'd be invited home, and have an opportunity to visit him and his family at home, and share a meal at his table. These qualities were truly amazing, which created a very wide and ever-growing circle of friends, associates, loyal camp followers, and so on.

For us, it was no different. When I say us, I mean me and my family, because within the year of arriving at Yale as a student, I had taken the Agrarian Studies graduate seminar, and at the end of that term—it was a spring course, so it was in May it ended and Jim had organized a huge gathering, it was a lovely time of the year, late spring—at his farmhouse. There was a band, led by another student, Michael Bell, who's now a distinguished sociologist, professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who was himself a gifted mandolin player, and he was part of a bluegrass band. We had band, we had square dancing, we had great food. I remember that was the first time I brought my two very tiny children, aged two and four, out to a farm somewhere, out in the countryside here in New England, where they got to see all these things, listen to very distinctive American music, and see people doing square dancing, and so on and so forth. That way, Jim and his late wife, Louise, embraced us into their lives in this fashion, and that was memorable.

Then, of course, a few years later, it looked like I had become part of his reliable crew, every late spring, working on shearing the sheep. We have many jokes we share about my rather inept ways of participating in sheep-shearing activities on the farm, but I persisted, and he admired my perseverance. I learned how to shear sheep, thanks to his patience and willingness to teach me that, other than anthropology or agrarian studies. So, I have fond memories of my involvement in sheep-shearing on the farm.

Another thing I remember is—this must have been around the time I was getting ready to leave, so 1997, '98—'97 it must be. He had just finished the manuscript of what became *Seeing Like a State*. We were both invited to a conference in Boston, where he was to be, I think, the keynote speaker, and I so happened to be one of the people giving a paper. Jim said, in his usual generous way, "Why should the two of us make our way there separately? Let's just drive together." I said, "That's very nice. We'll do that." I said, "Who's driving?" He said, "You're driving." I said okay, so I brought my car and we drove. Then I realized why I was driving, because he had this—he always likes to work with these really huge sheets of paper, and he had this really huge sheet of paper, on which he had, like, hundred different possible titles for that book manuscript. He unrolls it while I'm driving on the highway and he's sitting in the passenger seat. He unrolls this huge sheet of paper, which is partially blocking my view of the road, and says, "Now, without getting distracted, I want you to just listen while I read out these titles, and maybe you can glance over once in a while. We'll go over this list and start deciding which ones are not suitable, so that I can at least be down from a few hundred to maybe five or six by the time we complete this three-hour trip." That's what we did. We finally came down to a very short list, from which ultimately emerged *Seeing Like a State* for that famous book. That's pretty memorable.

There are many such incidents I can keep thinking about, but I think all of it points to the fact that he was a person of many interests, who had an exciting

life outside of the university, as a farmer, as a painter, and somebody who loved cooking, was always experimenting in the kitchen, making new kinds of foods, and baking and so on, and included people into all those aspects of his life, to the extent that they wished to be involved. I had the good fortune, because of my association with him over so many decades, to be involved in all those aspects of his life. I didn't paint with him, but I certainly was around him when he was doing some of his watercolors and so forth as well.

01-01:07:26

Holmes: Shivi, thanks so much for sharing your experiences and your time today. This has been wonderful. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to add?

01-01:07:39

Sivaramakrishnan: As I said at the outset, I'm just tremendously grateful that I've been able to go on the journey in my own life, and Jim Scott has been such a big part of that journey, a formative influence. Somebody who took me on as a student and now has been happy to work with me as a colleague and co-director of the program he founded. I can only hope that more people have such wonderful opportunities in their own careers. Because Agrarian Studies has been such a great institution, has given so much to so many people, I also hope it will continue to flourish. There will come a time when maybe Jim won't be involved with it, and maybe I won't be involved with it, but I hope others will be, and this program, in the spirit in which it has been founded and flourished in the last three decades, can continue for some more time, because I think that will be beneficial to a lot of people. That's my hope. That's my final thought.

01-01:08:45

Holmes: Thanks so much, Shivi.

[End of Interview]