

Michael Watts

*Michael Watts: Reflections on James C. Scott and
the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University*

The Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2019

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Michael Watts

Abstract

Michael J. Watts is the Emeritus "Class of 1963" Professor of Geography and Development Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. In this interview, Watts discusses his first encounter with the work of James C. Scott and the professional relationship that developed over the years; recollections from the field on the founding of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University and his experience as a presenter in the colloquium; the continuing connection between Yale and UC Berkeley; the inspiration the program served for an "Agrarian Studies West" at UC Berkeley called the Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics; the uniqueness and achievement of the Agrarian Studies Program; and the significant impact of Scott and Agrarian Studies across the social sciences.

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Project history

By Todd Holmes
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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: February 20, 2019

01-00:00:04

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is February 20, 2019. I have the pleasure of sitting down with Michael Watts, professor of geography here at UC Berkeley, and this is for the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, and we are here at his office at the Berkeley campus. Michael, thank you so much for sitting down with me today. Why don't we start with you telling us a little bit about yourself, and how you came here to Berkeley.

01-00:00:40

Watts:

Well, I'm English, born in England, and educated at London [University College London] in the 1960s. I had back then a sort of an interest in agrarian issues, I think in part, to be honest, Todd, because I was born in a very small English village in the southwest of the country—had about twenty people—on the edge of an old medieval commons. So, there was something agrarian about my childhood anyway, and I sort of pursued those interests when I was at London in the 1960s. But the 1960s in London, there was a lot going on. I got distracted in various ways, ended up going to Africa after I graduated and was there teaching, building schools, doing volunteer work during, as it so happened, a great famine in the Sahel, the West African Sahel. I was working in Nigeria and that sort of reanimated my interest in agricultural and food issues, actually, and that brought me back to graduate school, and I ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in geography working with anthropologists. That's really where I was seriously introduced first to Jim's [James Scott] work, actually. I then went back to do a study of agrarian change in Nigeria, got a PhD, and was lucky enough to be appointed here forty years ago, 1979.

01-00:02:11

Holmes:

Oh wow. That's amazing. Well, you mentioned Jim Scott. Tell us a little bit about how you first came to get acquainted with Jim.

01-00:02:20

Watts:

Well, I became acquainted with him in the sense of his work. As I mentioned, I was in Michigan in the early 1970s, and I knew that I wanted to do some type of field work in Africa working in peasant societies on agricultural issues. So, I took a raft of anthropological courses, taught by Roy Rappaport, Aram Yengoyan, who taught peasant studies, and it was through that that I became familiar with Jim's very early work, which was actually on patronage systems and sort of rural politics. That was my first recollection of Jim, through his work, and then more profoundly, when I got back from conducting my field work in 1978, I was honestly floundering trying to figure out a way of organizing the information and tell the story I wanted to tell, and that's when I stumbled across Jim's magnificent book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, and that turned my intellectual life upside down. I loved it for all sorts of reasons, the scope and scale of it. It was concerned with issues that directly helped me frame my own study.

So that was the first time when I really read his work very carefully, and of course, it was a controversial book. It elicited another book by Sam Popkin called *The Rational Peasant*, which was trying to argue that revolutionary and peasant activity could be explained in completely different ways from the type of framework that Jim had offered, which was partly Edward Thompson and partly Karl Polanyi. So, it was quite contentious, but it was enormously influential in my own work and the book that I went on to write, a book called *Silent Violence*. So that was my first exposure to Jim. I hadn't met him. That was my first introduction to him, through his work, and it was, I would say, without question, a foundational theoretical text in my own formation, if you like. My project, my book would have been completely different, and if you were to read my book—I don't recommend it—but if you did, you would see that it's a conversation with Jim, and Jim's work. Frankly, it's as simple as that. So that was my first exposure to his work.

01-00:04:56

Holmes:

Actually, I have read your work—which I *would* recommend people reading by the way [laughter]—and certainly see that engagement and conversation with Jim's *Moral Economy of the Peasant*. So, when did you first actually meet Jim Scott in person?

01-00:04:59

Watts:

So back in 1980, I was appointed to one of the committees of the Social Science Research Council [SSRC], and the SSRC still exists in Brooklyn, New York. Back then, as it does actually right now, it funds, among other things, doctoral field work for PhD students in the social sciences and the humanities working abroad, and the vehicle for funding students was then through things called area studies committees: South Asian Studies Committee, China Studies, African Studies, and so on. Jim had been a longtime member, and in fact, I believe he chaired the Southeast Asian Studies Area Studies Committee at the SSRC, and every year, there was a getting together of the committees to talk about intellectual trends, and what was going on in our areas, and cross-area conversation. I can't remember the exact year, but it must have been around 1981 or 1982, that's when I first met Jim face to face, as it were. And this is at the time when he was beginning to do his work on peasant resistance, *Weapons of the Weak*, and so after that there were a series of conferences, and you know Jim, before anything sees the light of day as regards books, Jim workshops and circulates his ideas at conferences giving talks.

He's been, I think, remarkable in that regard. Often when scholars have a project, they're actually quite protective of it. By that, I mean, a scholar is working on revolutionary change in South China perhaps is quite territorial and protective of his/her work; often scholars are reluctant to discuss, I think partly because maybe they're a little uncomfortable about ill-formed ideas, or perhaps there's something territorial about it, not wanting to feel their ideas are going to be challenged. That was absolutely not the case for Jim. And so,

for all of his books, he would tirelessly work the lecture circuit, conferences, etc., and in the 1980s, that was around *Weapons of the Weak*, which had an enormous impact. It's hard to imagine a book in the social sciences, and certainly that concerned political economy and the Global South, that had an impact like that book.

And so, in the 1980s, I ran into Jim in various settings where he was trying out, as he does, various versions of peasant resistance, the hidden transcript, *Weapons of the Weak*. He has this beautiful metaphor, if you remember, in that book where he says that you have to think about nonrevolutionary peasant politics as resembling a coral reef, that there are lots of polyps that, over time, build up the reef, and that's, in a sense, as he saw individual acts or small-scale collective acts of resistance building up, having a life that accumulates over time. So, anyway, that's when I began to see him on a bunch of occasions, and then in the 1990s, after he established the Agrarian Studies Program—of course, I can't remember whether I was literally in the first year, but in the first couple of years—Jim invited me to give a colloquium there.

01-00:08:39

Holmes:

Tell us a little bit about your first reaction to Agrarian Studies. Jim has discussed the multiple roots of the colloquium's format when he was developing the idea for the Agrarian Studies colloquium, but for a scholar such as yourself, to have that kind of room where people from all sorts of disciplines came in and you were able to workshop an idea, discuss your initial impressions of that.

01-00:09:05

Watts:

Well, the first thing to say is that there was nothing like that pertaining to the study of agriculture, and I mean agriculture in the Global North and the Global South. Obviously in the world of development, development theory and practice, agriculture had been studied in all sorts of ways, going back really to the 1960s and the Vietnam War, and this exploded in the 1970s; there was an enormous interest in what came to be called peasant studies. The *Journal of Peasant Studies* emerged in the early 1970s. That was associated with Henry Bernstein and Terry Byres and the University of London, but there was an explosion of interest. Some of John Berger's work, the great Marxist literary critic and novelist, emerged at the same. There was a renewed interest in what was called peasant studies. I was, in a sense, part of that, and that was an enormous and complicated field involving anthropologists and economists and political scientists and so on, and that preceded Jim's establishment of the Agrarian Studies Program.

01-00:10:14

So that was already in place, and there was a lot of activity, but it had a strong Global South, developing-world focus, and there wasn't anything outside of journals. There were some journals that were established that became the outlets and voices for that work, but there was nothing

institutionalized. What Jim did is a couple of things. He built upon that momentum, and he'd be the first to admit that that work on peasant studies, of which his book, *Moral Economy*, was foundational, certainly was a necessary starting point for Agrarian Studies, but what he did is to open it up, because now peasant studies work was almost exclusively on the Global South. I don't see this as a critique, but it was social-science oriented, political economy, with a strong, let's just call it Marxist inflection. And what Jim did was to open up agriculture in a way that peasant studies never had, to include, yes, questions of ecology, sustainability, but also to include the Global North and the condition of the Midwestern family farm, and to include, then, the humanities: history, art, popular writing about agriculture. Michael Pollan, as you know, who is in our journalism school here, showed up there.

01-00:11:41

Jim has a great nose for ideas and what one might call the ether of ideas, and so he brought all of this together and in a way that was completely so generous, nothing like it, and I think he had the intellectual breadth, of course, to do that. He had the connections to do it, and the vision, so that when that happened, it caused an enormous amount of excitement. It was not just multidisciplinary, but it had an openness and a capaciousness to it, and a sense that there was something new happening there, and that was the program.

Now you asked me, "Well, what was it like to go there?" Well I found it unbelievably intimidating, not that Jim is intimidating, but because, as you know, that program has a specific structure. The structure of the program is you write a paper, and then you get a couple of minutes to frame the paper when you're sitting down in that wonderful seminar room. Then you have a critic, and that critic has read your paper carefully, and would speak for maybe twenty minutes, or even a half hour sometimes. Then you'd be, as Jim put it, "gagged." The conversation would then open up and around the table could be artists, historians, political scientists, people from Yale, people from outside of Yale, from New York, and you sat there in silence, "gagged." Of course, I had been informed that this was the model, and I thought, "My God, this sounds like medieval torture for an hour, or more." After a break, then you had a chance to respond.

01-00:13:35

So, my recollection is that I was, at one level, quite intimidated about having one's work read that carefully. The experience of it was remarkable, actually, because that almost never happens: in other words, where someone reads and discusses your paper who comes from a quite different vantage point, different discipline, is perhaps a scholar of China. I remember the paper that I gave then was some work I had conducted in Africa but the discussion was both historical and comparative. I wrote about a particular form of really modern agriculture called contract farming. It's very common in the US, but it's also common in Africa. So it was a very focused conversation by

someone who came from a different discipline, different area of expertise, different set of questions, that itself was fascinating. And then to have a very wide-ranging conversation where many things were tabled—too many really—was wonderful. But the author can be (I was!) overwhelmed by the quality and quantity and sophistication of the response, you can't possibly address it all. As Jim always said, "Don't try to methodically go through everything—you can't. Assemble a couple of things that you want to focus on."

01-00:14:57

So, there was nothing like that I'd ever experienced. I had never been part of a seminar that ran that way. So the responses that one gets are sort of overwhelming, at the colloquium, and yet they were extraordinarily exciting. The challenge for, of course, the paper giver is how you respond, and Jim always said, "Don't try to respond to everything. It's impossible. Latch onto two or three things that you find surprising or interesting and work with them," which is what I did. But I guess the thing that I would want to emphasize more than anything else is that, at least in my experience up until then, I had never had a seminar experience where there was such a careful, almost granular reading of one's paper. Not just the respondent, everyone had read the paper, coming from very different disciplines, very different areas, very different theoretical traditions, and the nature of the open dialogue, it wasn't unnecessarily critical. It had a nice feel to it. It was humorous. I remember laughing a great deal. And so the tenor that Jim had set made what could have been, as I start in my remarks by saying, a rather intimidating experience, actually became quite the reverse.

01-00:16:20

Holmes:

After your initial association with Agrarian Studies, were you ever able to go back and attend more colloquiums?

01-00:16:33

Watts:

Well, I had a number of connections with the program after I gave that talk. One, let me say, was that I was very lucky to be able to place, over the last twenty-odd years, a number of my own PhD students in the program. They were awarded postdoctoral fellowships, so that was fantastic. That included someone who we then subsequently hired here in the anthropology department, Donald Moore. But I have had a number of students over the years who've been lucky to go there as postdoctoral fellows, and a number of my students who graduated here went off to tenure-track jobs, and in turn, were invited by Jim to give colloquia. So it has always been a traffic, if you like, that I've had here. And then, a number of colleagues on campus right now, including Nancy Peluso, for example, circled through that program in some way, were there for a while perhaps as postdoctoral fellows, perhaps attached to Yale, and they ended up migrating west, and so we had a type of Agrarian Studies West here in the sense, with many of their graduates and affiliates who'd come through as postdoctoral fellows and faculty. Incidentally, they were central in our effort to found something rather like an

Agrarian Studies Program here at Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley].

We didn't call it Agrarian Studies. We explicitly took all the ideas, we stole all the ideas from Jim. We had a group here that operated under the banner of political ecology, a sort of critical ecological anthropology and environmental studies. Not that Jim's program didn't have an environmental focus, or didn't have environmental speakers, it most certainly did, but that was, we felt, our comparative advantage here. So when I became the director of the Institute of International Studies in 1994, Louise Fortmann, who had also been to the Agrarian Studies Program; Don Moore, who was here then; and Nancy Peluso, the four of us established the Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics. And we were fortunately able to impose the pain and suffering that Jim had imposed on us by inviting him very early on in our colloquium series, because we adopted exactly the same format, a paper circulated in advance, gagging the speaker, et cetera. So we were wonderfully privileged to have Jim come in those early years. So, in that sense, I sort of feel that there's been a lot of traffic, to be honest with you, between the Agrarian Studies Program and Berkeley, faculty, students, to this day. A student of mine, a year and a half ago, was lucky enough to get a fellowship there. So, there's a real cross-country traffic.

01-00:19:34

Holmes:

Both Jim and Shivi have also regarded Berkeley as the Agrarian Studies of the West, in discussing the Berkeley working group. Tell us a little bit about when Jim came, and what that experience was like, particularly that he had to operate under the same kind of strictures that everyone else did for the past couple of decades.

01-00:19:58

Watts:

He did, and Jim is not the sort of person who, shall we say, is easy to gag. He's a very loquacious and very voluble man, so it was perhaps some rough justice we imposed on him. I don't recall the paper that he gave, I'm embarrassed to admit. I believe at that point it was work that was part of what became his interest in sort of anarchist traditions, as they appeared within agrarian traditions. Of course, it was a large crowd. Anywhere Jim goes, it's a large crowd.

I was thinking about other occasions when I've been with Jim, and I'll just relate an anecdote because it says something about him, I think. We were both invited to Macalester College in Minneapolis, Saint Paul. It's a very wonderful, elite, liberal arts college—my daughter attends the college!—and they have, through their global citizenship program, an annual series of sort of blue-ribbon lectures. And so they invite in at the same time three people, and one was Jim; one was Ravi Kanbur, who had actually quite controversially been fired from the World Bank, very brilliant senior economist; and then myself. We gave talks, and Jim's talk, I remember, was

on language, among other things, and they arranged it in such a way that after each talk, an undergraduate gave a response. You could imagine, this is your brilliant young student there, but I remember the person that responded to Jim was a young Asian American woman, and, like all of them, they were incredibly nervous. It was in a big auditorium, and so on and so forth, and she did an absolutely slap-up job, but what I remember about it was the type of generosity and humanity in the way that Jim responded, taking very seriously the types of questions she posed and they were questions that pushed and shoved a little bit. That says a great deal to me about the way in which Jim interacts with people, taking them very seriously, working with them, never flippant, never sidelining, et cetera. And I think particularly, because it was a young undergraduate who clearly was quite nervous, the way that he responded to her and drew other questions out of her was really wonderful. It says a great deal about a certain type of intellectual generosity that Jim has, and one that was, I think, hardwired into the Agrarian Studies Program for sure. But it's also hardwired into him in the way that he comports himself in these types of settings.

01-00:23:16

Holmes:

You've known Jim now for well over thirty years, and this is one of those great chances of where I get to ask for you to maybe share any memorable stories or observations about Jim. You just shared a great anecdote, which I couldn't agree more with, and Jim has to be one of the most, not just generous, but also brilliant scholars, and how that melds together is what's so unique about Jim Scott. Are there other memorable stories that you'd like to share?

01-00:23:51

Watts:

Well my memories of Jim of that sort are wrapped up, of course, with visiting his farm. I'm a beekeeper, and so, we would always talk bees, among other things. So, just being part of that side of his life was always fantastic, and I know you've visited, and so on, and share those feelings. Just to be in that type of setting with him, which itself is remarkable, there aren't many people in academia who have, as part of their lives, that type of connection with the land. So, those are fond memories, but I always say that I think about Jim Scott every day, and that is because on my keychain is a large metal tractor, a toy tractor, that Jim gave me as a present when I went out to speak in the Agrarian Studies Program. And so, it was again, a wonderful indication of just something that on one level is quite prosaic, and a gift, but obviously it says a great deal about the type of person that Jim is. So, I do, quite literally, because every time I get my keys, there is Jim Scott's little metal tractor attached to my bundle of keys.

01-00:25:17

Holmes:

Shivi likes to call it being part of "the Tractor Club." [laughter]

01-00:25:22

Watts:

Well I'm a fully paid up and honorable member of the Tractor Club.

01-00:25:27

Holmes:

I wanted to get your thoughts on this, Michael, regarding the generosity and character of Jim Scott. When you look at the back cover of one of his books, you'll have comments, particularly in his later work, where scholars use the word "brilliant," in the blurbs, which is then followed by a bio line that Jim Scott "is the Sterling Professor of political science and anthropology at Yale University, he is also a"—in which he likes to put it—"a mediocre beekeeper and farmer." [laughter] How many people would have a bio line like that, particularly in academia?

01-00:26:21

Watts:

The answer is only Jim; it's as simple as that. The remarkable thing about Jim's books are, we could talk about the impact, and, every book that he has written since *Moral Economy* is a major intervention. It generated and spawned volumes of work. It would be interesting to do this, actually, to see the numbers of dissertations, for example, for which *Seeing Like a State* is the formative text, a canonical work that he/she is in conversation with that idea. That is the case for every single book he's produced. So just that alone, if you think about it in terms of sort of the spin-off effects, whether you agreed with everything in the book or not, how generative they were. I don't know any other social scientist for whom one could say that. It just spawns a minor academic industry around the moral economy, around peasant resistance, around anarchism—whatever it is, every single text has had that quality.

So there's that, which is remarkable in and of itself. Then there is the fact that he's a fantastic wordsmith. There're lots of great books that are a slog, Todd, to get through. I don't need to tell you this. They are bloody hard work. They can have clotted prose. They can be hyper-theoretical in a way that makes the reading experience utterly dreadful. Jim's work is, of course, deeply theoretical, a serious engagement with state theory, with Gramsci, with Marx, with Chayanov, but he does that with great writing. Maybe someone like Edward Thompson would be one of the few people that comes to mind who can write in a way that is theory laden, but the prose is magnificent, it draws you in, and yet is rooted and grounded in a control of the materials. I mean, German forestry science? Only Jim.

01-00:28:35

So, the point is that it's not just the impact of the text. It's a model, in a way, of a certain style of writing that I'd love to say was widespread in academia, but it's not, and a type of capaciousness and openness. It's not closed, and all of the texts don't close off the conversation. That's why I say they're so generative. He leaves open the possibility. I just wrote a review of his latest book for the *American Historical Review*, and again, the style and quality of the writing comes through yet again, and of course, his modesty. He sees himself as just sort of an amateur, as he says, pulling together a few threads here and there to create a wonderfully original and challenging, completely provocative way of thinking about the rise of states, and yet at the same time, saying that, "look, this is not nailed down. These are things that need to be

explored." So it's that openness. To have all of those things going on in his books, it's remarkable. I couldn't think of anyone else, as I say. I can think of people who are a great stylist when they write; I can think of people who are great theorists, and so on. But to be able to bring all of that together in the way that I've just described, I think Jim's a singular case.

01-00:30:11

Holmes:

That's very well put. Thinking of the Agrarian Studies Program, which now has been around for nearly thirty years, what do you think the keys are to that program's success? Your thoughts here are particularly important in light that you've borrowed, and were influenced and inspired by the way that the program has operated.

01-00:30:38

Watts:

Well, you're right, our workshop here, we absolutely borrowed lock, stock, and barrel the whole structure. There's no question about that, but our experience, I think, with the workshop here, might have something to say to your question. That workshop here was extraordinarily successful. I think it had a buzz and an energy, but I think all of us—Don Moore, Nancy, Louise—would all say that these sorts of endeavors take a lot of effort, they require a lot of tender loving care, and the energy can wax and wane, and I think there were periods where we were definitely waning. What is remarkable to me about Agrarian Studies is, and Jim may have a different view from the inside, but from looking at it from the outside is the degree to which that type of energy and vitality that was there has been sustained, that people still want to go; that, in fact, scholars still circulate through; that the diversity and the openness of the colloquium, etc., that's been sustained.

That just doesn't happen, and I think it can only happen because of the type of central role that Jim played in it, yes, as a type of figurehead—everyone knows him—but as a person, as a personality, and, constantly searching out new and different ways of thinking about Agrarian Studies. Never has that program been locked into, as it could well have been, a certain way of thinking about agriculture. I think that must be Jim. It's his willingness to engage with politics, community groups, community speakers, people who are not academics, artists, journalists, engaging with policy, global climate change—I think that's all been built into this program, and I think it's part and parcel of why it's been so durable, and it has sustained this electricity that I was talking about. That's remarkable to me, because I've had a lot of experience on this campus running, if you like, types of seminar series. Perhaps not as ambitious as Jim, but nonetheless, keeping things alive and interesting is damned hard work, and he's done it, and it's remarkable. It's utterly remarkable.

01-00:33:21

Holmes:

Well, you've talked a little bit about Jim's impact on you as a scholar. How did Agrarian Studies impact you?

01-00:33:32

Watts:

Well, I think it obviously impacted us in the sense that a group of us here felt that we wanted to replicate something like that on the West Coast, with perhaps slightly different points of emphasis, so that was a clear and direct impact. It impacted me and my students here because I could—and we here, Nancy, Don, lots of other scholars—could point to that program and say, "Look what's happening there. This area of agriculture is, and agrarian studies broadly construed, is exciting and interesting," and I say that because generally speaking in academia, that's not the case. Agriculture is a bit of a snooze. "Agriculture, yeah, that's the sort of stuff that the land grant institutions do, up at UC Davis: agronomy, extension." Within the social sciences, I think it's fair to say that, at least up until the 1990s when peasants began to emerge, it was sort of a backwater. Now you study electoral systems, you study theories of the state, but agriculture?

So what Jim did was to give agriculture a type of centrality and an import that it historically had not had, building upon, as I said, some of that explosion of interest in peasants in the 1970s. But he gave it a whole new salience and visibility in the social sciences, and then, so, again, for me having students coming through this department, say, or equally with Nancy, to be able to point to that program, and say, "See? It's important. Yale, Jim Scott, Agrarian Studies, look at how exciting that is. Look at what that program is doing." So, in that sense, it was a type of a bell weather for exciting social science, again, remarkable achievement, remarkable achievement.

01-00:35:35

Holmes:

Well, Michael, I want to thank you for sharing all of this and taking the time to sit down with me to talk about Jim and the program. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to add?

01-00:35:48

Watts:

Well just that Jim's one of those people that one meets in life very rarely, for whom one of the responses is envy, not envy of his achievements—they're second to none—but rather, envious that we haven't been able to spend more time with him. Do you know what I mean? Envious of people who, like yourself, perhaps, who were lucky enough to be there for four years. He's that type of personality who you want to be around. You feel that there's an inexhaustibility to his interests, to the depth of his mind, to his ideas. In my experience, anyway, you don't run across those people very often, but Jim Scott is one of them.

01-00:36:43

Holmes:

Michael, thank you so much for your time.

01-00:36:45

Watts:

My pleasure.

[End of Interview]