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James C. Scott

James C. Scott: Agrarian Studies and Over 50 Years of Pioneering Work in the Social Sciences

The Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2018

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James C. Scott
(Photo by Michael Marsland)

Abstract

James C. Scott is the Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale University, with appointments in the Department of Anthropology and School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. He is the author of over nine books, most of which are not only widely read across the disciplines of the social sciences, but considered foundational works in those disciplines. In this oral history, Jim Scott discusses his childhood in New Jersey and the Quaker school that played a large role in shaping the scholar known for marching to his own drum. He discusses his experience with the National Student Association during the early 1960s, the interesting turn his studies took upon entry to Yale Graduate School, and the string of books he produced in the decades that followed. These include *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*; *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*; *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*; *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*; *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*; and *Against The Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, among other works. He also recounts the founding of the Program in Agrarian Studies, an interdisciplinary flagship in the humanities and social sciences now celebrating thirty years of operation at Yale University.

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Interview History

By Todd Holmes
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 elusive group is an impressive class of scholars. As a research unit based at UC Berkeley, the Oral History Center 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, university presidents, leading scientists, and pioneering faculty of color fill this collection. In recent years, the OHC has sought to further expand this 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 is the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, a two-part series featuring the life history of Jim Scott and short interviews with nearly 20 affiliates of the Yale Agrarian Studies Program.

For many students and scholars in the academy, James C. Scott needs no introduction. He is the Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale, with appointments in the Department of Anthropology and School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. He is the author of over nine books, most of which are not only widely read across the disciplines of the social sciences, but considered foundational works in those disciplines. As longtime colleague and Program affiliate, Michael Dove, would note: "Many of us are one-book wonders. Each of Jim's books was an important book, and they were all different." The impact of Scott's scholarship is immeasurable. Over the decades, his books became a series of major interventions, shaping dozens of discussions and research agendas throughout the academy. "Brilliant" became an adjective used by readers with no sense of hyperbole. Yet at the same time, those works of scholarship also capture the modesty and sense of humor of the author. Jokes, often spun in a self-effacing manner, pepper the pages of the books' forwards, just as the prestigious title of Sterling Professor of Political Science was typically followed by the appellation of "mediocre farmer and bee keeper" in the author bio. From his scholarship and larger-than-life persona to the world-renowned program he founded at Yale, James C. Scott is in a class all his own. It is hoped that this oral history captures those many facets.

The use of oral history in the study and documentation of intellectual history has proven invaluable in recent decades. At the most basic level, oral history allows us to move beyond the book and the less-than-riveting discussions of literature reviews. It offers the opportunity for the scholars themselves to dig deeper into the motivations, influences, and hurdles they grappled with while producing a given work—information not usually included in the book's introduction. At a broader level, these interviews also provide much-needed perspectives and help document the history of various fields of study, university life, and academic institutions.

For me, the idea of using oral history within the context of documenting intellectual history began with Jim Scott. While in graduate school at Yale, I worked for the Agrarian Studies Program for four years, holding the esteemed positions of graduate assistant and program coordinator. As a US historian, my exposure at that point to social science literature (let alone anything on the Global South) was minimal, to say the least. Thus, I had the unique experience of having worked with Jim Scott before I read Jim Scott, a perspective that perhaps allowed me to see more quickly what some miss and others don't get the privilege to appreciate: James C. Scott is as impressive in person as he is in the written word. There are at least a dozen proverbs—from just as many cultures—about being in the presence of something special; and all come to the similar conclusion that such a presence needs no introduction, for it is simply felt and known. Those who have had the opportunity to spend just an hour with Jim Scott, be it at the Agrarian Studies colloquium or one of the Program's dinners, recognize that presence. It's not just the sharpness and breadth of his intellect but also the genuine humility and playfulness through which that intelligence is brought to the table. In many respects, the Agrarian Studies Program he founded embodies this "big spiritedness," as rigid academic norms and disciplinary boundaries are cast aside in favor of the larger endeavor of advancing interdisciplinary discussion and building community. For students and scholars alike, the rooms of Agrarian Studies offered a rare and special space, just as Jim Scott consistently provided the important reminder that happiness and achievement in one's intellectual pursuits should not be separate destinations. "If we're not having fun," he would often say, "then what the fuck are we doing?" Thus, over the years I came to appreciate how only oral history could aptly capture the many facets of scholars like Jim Scott. I hope I succeeded in that effort here and that this volume does both the project and its narrator justice.

The interview sessions that compose this volume took place at Jim Scott's farm in Durham, Connecticut during the fall of 2018. I decided to conduct the interviews inside the house, rather than in his study in the nearby barn, since it offered better lighting and acoustics for the recording. I later regretted that decision. Just a few months after the interviews, the barn burned down, destroying Jim's study and all of its contents. Not capturing him in that space, for even just one interview session, is an unfortunate shortcoming that rests with me. That aside, the nearly ten hours of interviews in this volume offer a rare and in-depth look at the life, work, and career of James C. Scott. In these interviews, Jim discusses his childhood in New Jersey and the Quaker school that played a large role in shaping the scholar known for marching to his own drum. He discusses his journey with the National Student Association, the interesting turn his studies took upon entry to Yale Graduate School, and the string of books he produced in the decades that followed. Moreover, he recounts the founding of the Agrarian Studies Program, an interdisciplinary flagship in the humanities and social sciences now celebrating thirty years of operation at Yale.

Jim Scott will officially retire in the spring of 2021, ending 45 years of service at Yale. Indeed, he leaves an immeasurable footprint: in the academy, on campus, and certainly within the rooms of Agrarian Studies. It is hoped that this oral history will offer future generations a glimpse of the scholar behind the books and the person who helped shape nearly three generations of work.

Interview 1: September 22, 2018

01-00:00:07

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 22, 2018, and I am sitting down for our first session with James C. Scott, Sterling Professor of Political Science, for his oral history as part of the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. We are here at his farm in the beautiful town of Durham, Connecticut. Jim, thanks so much for taking the time to sit down.

01-00:00:31

Scott:

Happy to be here.

01-00:00:33

Holmes:

Well, this oral history is going to, of course, cover your life and career, and all the various facets that go along with that. In this first session, I'd like to start out by talking a little bit about your family and background. You were born in New Jersey, in 1936?

01-00:00:53

Scott:

Correct.

01-00:00:56

Holmes:

Maybe tell me a little bit about your parents, and their occupation and background.

01-00:01:00

Scott:

So my father was a doctor, and his family came from West Virginia. They moved there from western Pennsylvania. They moved to Morgantown, and his mother was very ambitious for her children, kind of quite educated herself, had gone, I think, to the World's Sunday School Convention in Geneva, Switzerland. They settled in Morgantown, West Virginia, right next to the university. The house is still there. They built the house, and they took in junior professors as boarders, and did their laundry and fed them, and all of the children, five of them, all went to the University of West Virginia, as undergraduates. The two daughters became schoolteachers; of the three sons, two became doctors and one became a research chemist.

And so, it was a successful educational project, if you like, and my father was trained at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, and then started to practice in New Jersey where he met my mother. My mother was from—to hear her tell it, her family has more or less evaporated—she came from a prominent Philadelphia family, and was born in Lankenau District of Philadelphia. Her mother died as the result of the complications of childbirth, and those were the days when men could not raise children, and so the children were dispersed. So, all of her brothers were dispersed to uncles and aunts, and she came to live with a person who was called "Papa Butterworth," who was an uncle on, I don't know whether it was her mother or father's side,

in New Jersey, and that's where they met, and they settled in Beverly, New Jersey.

01-00:03:16

Holmes: Did you have any siblings?

01-00:03:20

Scott: I had an older brother who was born seven and a half, eight years before me, Parry was his name, and Skip was his sort of nickname. He died three or four years ago, and we were actually quite close. He'd lived in Philadelphia, and had pretty much a sort of working-class career, worked at a plastics firm in which he was in charge of quality control for the colors in plastics, and retired reasonably early. He has four kids with whom I'm also in touch, four boys, and I remain in touch with them.

01-00:04:08

Holmes: What was the family environment like for you, growing up in your childhood?

01-00:04:15

Scott: Well, it's actually an interesting story and not trivial. So my father was a small-town doctor, and so we were part of the small-town elite, such as it was, and my father was a militant atheist, and my mother was an agnostic, but they insisted that I go to a Sunday school, because everybody went to Sunday school, except the Catholic Sunday school was not on the menu. So they just drove me past the façade of all these little churches in town, and I had to choose one, and I think I chose the Presbyterians at that point because they had some pretty trees in front—for no particularly good reason—and so I went to Presbyterian Sunday school.

My father died when I was nine years old, and we went from being well to do, not quite overnight but very quickly, into being quite poor. So, I had this experience of downward mobility, and I remember someone saying at the little Presbyterian Sunday school that I was a rich kid, and then I became a poor kid. My mother, however, continued to feel superior to everyone around her, even as she became poorer and poorer. She prided herself on speaking better English, being more sophisticated, and so on, even as her actual level of living went down. I should emphasize, the reason I went to a Quaker school was because evidently, my father—in those days, all children had to have a physical exam once a year, and it was a charitable activity by the local doctor. So my father, when he had an hour free, would go and pull kids out of class and do all the physical exams, because he wasn't paid for it. The teacher of my first-grade class at public school in Beverly was a teacher who resented my father disrupting her classes by pulling kids out for physical exams. And so I sat in the back of the first grade class and was never called on for the whole year, and that distressed my father, so he took me out and sent me to a Quaker school, and that's how I got to be in the Quaker school.

And I remember my father, although he died when I was nine, I got to know him very well because he would take me around in his car when he made calls on patients. I remember an elderly man dying of cancer that my father was good friends with, and all he could do was ease his pain and give him medicine, but they would talk for a half hour, and I remember my father trying to argue this man out of his Christian beliefs, because my father didn't like the idea that he was going to die with all these illusions. It was kind of gentle and friendly, but he was trying to undermine his Christian convictions on the guy's deathbed, which now seems a little excessive. I remember it partly because my father smoked a pipe, and one time the pipe caught his overcoat on fire that was in the hallway when I was there, and so I somehow remember that association.

01-00:08:00

Holmes:

Well, let's talk about the Quaker school, because I know you've stated many times before how influential that experience was. The school was called the Moorestown Friends School, is that correct?

01-00:08:15

Scott:

Right.

01-00:08:16

Holmes:

In what grade did you start there?

01-00:08:17

Scott:

Second grade. My class when I graduated was like twenty-six or twenty-seven people, and it was the biggest class that the school had ever had, so you can imagine how small and intimate it was. Many of these kids, I was with from second grade all the way through high school, so kind of, I know them right down to the marrow of their bones, and vice versa. I might add, my mother was an alcoholic. I didn't realize that at the time, but she was only quasi-functioning, and the school was a refuge for me, and I think the teachers knew. I should go back, because it's—I find it relevant, anyway.

So, my mother actually tried to commit suicide after my father died, and so, she went off to be hospitalized and treated. I went to live in Fairmont, West Virginia, with an uncle and aunt for maybe six weeks or so, and the school there became my refuge as well. I can remember, I was at camp when my father died and my brother and my mother came up to tell me that my father had died. I'm told—though I don't know remember—that my first reaction was: "How are we going to live?" Rather than breaking into tears and sobbing, I had this sort of practical, immediate reaction. When I was in West Virginia, I remember that one day, in music class, we learned "Londonderry Air": "Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling"—I don't know if you know the song, but it has "well I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow." It's about the boy going off to the First World War and dying, and so on, and suddenly, all of a sudden, the grief about my father's death came back and I was in the back of the classroom in tears. It was the end of the class, and the rest of the kids left,

and I remember that the music teacher came—she knew that my father had died and that's why I was there—and she hugged me. So, to give you some sense for how, in a nonfunctioning family, the school became a kind of substitute parent, and I think I tried to please them, and they regarded me as a kind of charitable case.

I was the first scholarship kid in the school as near as I can tell, and I worked for them starting at age twelve or so in the summers, and on weekends, mopping floors and sanding desks and so on. And so they, the teachers, I had a special kind of niche as far as the teachers were concerned, and, my father had been a Roosevelt Democrat, and the school, because there was tuition involved, most of the kids came from relatively well-to-do families and almost all of them were Republicans, and all the teachers, of course, were Democrats. And so, I was the only Democrat in my class, basically—maybe there were one or two others—but the teachers kind of loved me for that, because, although they couldn't express their politics, they were on my side in most of these things, and I was a loudmouthed little kid so I was in a lot of debates and so on and they were on my side.

01-00:12:03

Holmes:

At this school, if we look at some of the illustrious alumni, Alice Paul, I think, is counted among them.

01-00:12:10

Scott:

I didn't know that. I got a—I'll show that to you later. I got the first Alice Paul Award from the school, maybe twenty-five, thirty years ago, and I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know who Alice Paul was until I got the award, and then I figured it out. I know her home in D.C. was made into a kind of national monument by Obama at some point. But for me, in terms of my politics and my writing, the Quaker school was important for at least two reasons I can put my finger on. One of them is that we had a Quaker meeting every Thursday, and there were elderly Quakers who came to this. As you know, Quakers, their great innovation is not to have a clergy. It seems to me to be this sort of great anarchist, democratic step, not have someone to tell you what to think, but there were kind of elders who would speak more often than others.

I graduated in 1954, and it was fairly common for there to be Quaker conscientious objectors who had spent the Second World War in prison, as COs, and as you can imagine, being a CO in the Second World War was not something that was looked on with favor. These people were despised and hated, and they were actually involved, many of them, in medical experiments in prison. They kind of volunteered themselves as guinea pigs to show their patriotism in another way, and so, I was confronted with people who I didn't agree with at that point, but who I recognized were people who were willing to sacrifice everything for a strong belief. I also had Quaker friends, including Quaker friends who, in their family, used "thee" and "thy" in the sort of old-

fashioned way. And if you're brought up a Quaker, by and large, these people were capable of being a minority of one in a crowd of 100. They had a kind of self-assured sense. For things that mattered to them, they would go against the crowd. They didn't mind being isolated, and so on. I wasn't that kind of kid, but the Quakers helped me become that kind of kid.

The other thing that was important was more overt politics, I guess. The Quakers have this idea, "the light of God in every man," and it meant that they were involved in education for Native Americans, in prison education, and the Underground Railroad, and so on. So the social gospel of the Quakers impressed me, and they had things called weeklong work camps. You could volunteer for these. These were not required, but we would spend a week in Philadelphia. We would spend a day or two working with a slum family helping paint their apartment. We would go to Communist dock worker meetings. We went to Father Divine's, who was a sort of, kind of religious, charismatic, black figure. We went to homeless shelters. We went to Moyamensing Prison, where Slick Willie Sutton was an inmate then, and Moyamensing Prison, and Byberry Mental Institution.

There was a weeklong work camp in Washington, D.C., that I went to in which we went to the Soviet Embassy. This is 1953, right? So it was the height of the Cold War, and we talked to people who'd just come back from China, had good things to say about the Chinese revolution. So I got a kind of picture of the underbelly of Philadelphia, for example, in a way that a public school person would not have gotten, and they didn't tell you what to believe about it. We stayed in some church basement for the week, but it was a kind of social education for how the other half lived, that made a deep impression on me.

01-00:16:43

Holmes:

You talked about conscience objectors during World War II, and if we look at the Korean War, that was also going full steam during your last few years there at the Quaker school. What were the discussions around the school in regard to the war, and what were your views on that at that time?

01-00:17:08

Scott:

I don't think I had progressive views about the Korean War at all. My brother was in the Korean War. So he was drafted. He went to Korea. He was wounded, and his best friend sort of died in his arms in an engagement. This is when the battlefield had stabilized toward the end of the war, well after the Pusan-Inchong Landing, and so on, and Pork Chop Hill, Jane Russell Hill, where those were famous areas. I don't think I had an antiwar view. I don't think the schoolteachers, if they were against that war, probably would not have said anything anyway, for fear of them getting in trouble with the parents of their right-wing students.

And so, in terms of the Korean War, the big moment in my family during that war was, we were watching one of the major news network's pictures of the Korean War GIs shaving when they were back from the front, and there was my brother, on TV! [laughs] And so, the idea that somehow, of all the people being photographed, my mother got to see her son on television as part of just an ordinary newsreel. My father was an atheist and authoritarian, and when my brother, who was also going to another Quaker school, came back selling dolls, my father thought this was a sissy thing to do, and he took my brother out of the school almost overnight, and put him into a military school, which was the worst thing that could have happened to my brother. My brother was naturally left-handed, and they made him write with his right hand, and it gave him a speech defect, and the military school was just not the best thing for him at the time. So, my brother had a very different, if you like, kind of high school and middle school experience than I did.

01-00:19:33

Holmes:

Well you graduate, as you were saying, in 1954, and then, you entered Williams College that fall, is that correct?

01-00:19:43

Scott:

Yeah, September, '54.

01-00:19:45

Holmes:

Now you weren't the first in your family to attend college, so was college usually discussed? It sounds from your father's family that there was already a tradition of higher education.

01-00:19:54

Scott:

The whole family was completely obsessed by education, and I remember my father saying, "Oh, I wish one of my boys would go to Harvard," or something like that. It was the gold ring in the sky for that family, and my grandmother was infamous for this. All the children hated her in a certain way because she pushed them all the time. So if you came back with five As and one B, she'd give you the criticism for the B and no praise for the As. And so, there's a famous letter that my father writes to his mother when my brother fails a class at college, and he says, "It's about time somebody in this family failed a class, and I want my son to accept other humans and not feel superior to them the way you have taught us to feel superior to the people around us, and how much it's cost us."

So my brother went to Marietta College in Ohio, partly at the recommendation of an aunt who was a schoolteacher in Parkersburg, West Virginia—it's right across the river—and I went to Williams. Oh, I don't know; I can't remember the places I applied to. I remember the first place I got into was Dickinson, because I can still remember the letter saying, "You're admitted to Dickinson," which is where—who's the famous, early, Native American athlete? [James Thorpe] It was in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It was an Indian school. He was a famous football player later on. I had a Latin teacher whom I admired and he

had gone to Williams. I had never heard of Williams and he just mentioned it as one of the places I might apply to and I applied to it. I forget how many places I got accepted to, maybe two or three, and Williams was the farthest away from my mother, [laughs] and so I think I chose on the basis of distance from mother, and I went to Williams.

I don't know if you want to go on to Williams, but Williams was a super prep-school place, all boys, all went to Andover, Exeter, St. Paul's. It was about as preppy as any school you could possibly imagine, and I, as a South Jersey boy, I remember I had a jacket with patch pockets that I was really proud of, that was fairly cool in Southern New Jersey. When I got to Williams, I realized nobody had anything even remotely like this. I put it away, and I saved for two years to buy a little tweed jacket, so I would look like a Williams boy. It took me two years to save the money.

So, I felt completely out of place, socially, at Williams, but there were other people who were out of place as well, so I made some good friends, and the faculty at Williams was stupendously good. I liked the education as much as I didn't like the social atmosphere of Williams, and it had one of the best, and still does, one of the best small-college economics departments in the country. And so, I majored in political economy, with an emphasis, actually, on the economics, and so, I might as well have been an economics major. I was in classes with just two or three students. And so, I have to credit Williams with at least a traditional, liberal arts education that was hard to beat.

01-00:24:14

Holmes:

Talk a little bit about the campus environment. Now you mentioned the prep school social aspects, but at this time too, there was also rising political tensions if we think of McCarthyism, the Cold War, even some of the early stages of Civil Rights. Did that have any impact on you at that time politically, and in regard to your thinking as a young student?

01-00:24:50

Scott:

Not much, for the reason that, although I was involved in a kind of politics associated with this Quaker school and high school, Williams, as you know, is tucked into this little corner of northwestern Massachusetts. I was part of the debating club. Most of the people in debating club were Democrats, or at least deviant Republicans, and I think I went to a couple of, oh—I can't quite remember what they were. They were like work camps, where people from Vassar and Boston College, and Amherst would have been, and Mount Holyoke, and so on, and I did a little bit of that. But I think the Williams education was like a hermetically sealed spaceship in which there were people with whom I shared politics, many of them Jews from New York and Boston, but not all of them, and so, my politics were intact as left-wing politics, but there was no particular use that I had for them.

I played soccer, and I was on the freshman swim team, and I got named to some kind of honorary society, for reasons I don't quite understand. But when I arrived at Williams, even though I had a good education in Moorestown—I remember that my brother dropped me off at the school, and there were all these prep-school kids, and they were all, I now realize, they were trying to impress one another, but they were talking about artists and writers and so on, and poets that I had never even heard of, let alone have an opinion about. I remember calling my mother and said, "I'll do my best, but I'll probably be back home by Christmas, because I don't think I can cut it here." And so, I, for the first three years at Williams, I worked like a crazy man, because I thought I was too stupid to be there, and then, only in my junior year did I realize I was doing well and I could relax a little bit.

01-00:27:53

Holmes:

You've stated before, you started a senior honors thesis on the economic development of Burma.

01-00:28:00

Scott:

Well, I know I've said this to somebody before—I don't know if you've heard it—but my professor was actually a famous economist even though he didn't publish a lot: Emile Déspres. He assigned me, as it were, a thesis topic which was on German wartime mobilization. It turned out that Germany didn't have double and triple shifts even early in the war when they had the manpower to have triple shifts or double shifts in the industries. So that was my job, and as I said, I had started to relax. I fell in love in the first semester of my senior year, and I didn't do very much on this thesis, and when the professor called me in, and I tried to fake it, in like, early December, he realized that I hadn't done much of any work, and he said, "Get out. You're not going to do an honors thesis under me. You haven't done anything. Get out."

And so, I realized that, although I wanted to be an honor student, I was going to have to find someone else to adopt me. So I just knocked on the doors of the other economists in the economics building, and as you mentioned, there's this guy Bill Hollinger, with whom I had not taken a class, who said he'd worked on Indonesia. Later on, he actually became a famous economist of the wine industry I think in France. He said, "You know, I've always wanted to know something about Burmese economic development. If you'll study Burmese economic development, I'll adopt you," and I said, "Fine," and I closed the door behind me when I left, and said to myself, "Where's Burma?" [laughter] I only knew it was somewhere over there in Asia between India and China, and so I did an economics thesis on Burmese economic development mostly from—there's a big advising firm named Knappen-Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy, who actually were the contractors to draw up the first five-year plan for Burma. So that was the document I was mostly working from.

So I had also, not knowing what to do, I applied to join the CIA. I had applied to Harvard Law School and had been accepted, and on a kind of flash of

daring, I applied for a Rotary Fellowship to Burma, and I got the Rotary Fellowship to Burma. I thought to myself, I can postpone Harvard Law School, I can always go to law school, but when am I going to get a chance to go to Burma? And so, I decided to go to Burma and spent a year there, and in the meantime—this is not in a lot of my stuff—the CIA people asked me to write reports on Burmese student politics and so on, which I did. Then they arranged through the National Student Association to have me go to Paris for a year and be an overseas representative for the National Student Association. I went to the Congo; I went to Ghana; I went to, oh, Scotland. I spoke at the French National Student Union meeting. I went to the Polish—first American to go to the Polish National Student meeting, et cetera. It was quite an experience. It was very cosmopolitan, and I learned French when I was there.

And then, I got elected vice president of the National Student Association and spent a year in Philadelphia working for the National Student Association. In those days, actually, the CIA connection, the reason why it's interesting—it's in my Google thing because a woman who wrote about all the NSA people who were associated with the CIA made sure it got in there—is that, for example, in France, the National Student Association was very instrumental in allowing Algerian students who were all kicked out of France during the Algerian War under De Gaulle, we helped to sort of arrange their movement to Lusanne in Switzerland, where they could go to a Francophone university, but not in France. And so, I knew at that point a fair amount about North African politics, and Francophone Africa: Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and so on.

01-00:33:11

Holmes:

Talk a little bit about your experience in Burma. Would you characterize this as maybe your first foray into doing some kind of fieldwork? What were your activities there?

01-00:33:30

Scott:

It was not my first trip abroad to a non-English-speaking country. I spent the summer through, not a classmate but an upperclassman who I knew; I spent a summer working in Venezuela, working half the summer at a stockbrokerage in Caracas, being a file clerk, essentially, and the other half actually carrying cement bags in Carabobo—so that's Cemento Carabobo—and playing dominos and getting drunk every night. My Spanish was pretty good at the end of the summer, just with the dominos and the liquor.

So when I went to Burma, however, I stopped first in Calcutta. I'd never seen poverty like in Calcutta. It was quite extraordinary. I walked from the airport into the city just because we arrived at something like 2 a.m. in the morning and I thought, "Well, why don't I walk into the city and see what it's like?" And people sleeping on the streets, and beggars, and so on, I can remember it like it was yesterday. Then I went to Rangoon, and I lived in a student dormitory, or what we would call like a research assistant dormitory. That is to say, there were people called demonstrators, and demonstrators were the

people who were like advanced students who set up lab experiments for a kind of lecture in the lab. I lost thirty-five pounds when I was there because the food was so bad. A bunch of us got together and had someone cook for us, so like six of us who, they were demonstrators. I had a Triumph motorcycle. It was broken down in a Burmese backyard, so you can imagine the kind of shape it was in, and it was fixed up, and it was a 1940 Triumph—and I went all around Burma on it, to Mandalay and other places—so old that the springs were in the handlebars rather than in the shocks going down to the front wheel. And to get it started, you had to put your hand over the air intake to choke it, and if you wanted to turn it off, you just kept your hand over the air intake and suffocated the engine.

Anyway, it was quite an experience, and I did kind of things that were crazy and dangerous and so on in terms of going all around the country. I then got involved with a lot of ethnic students, and the student union there was Communist-run at that point, and I actually got some death threats, and I decided I'd go to the University of Mandalay just to get away from that, and spent like five months there, mostly learning Burmese. I went all over the country, but I didn't know anything about anthropology. I hadn't done any fieldwork. What I wanted to do was to do economic research on Burmese economic development to follow. That's what I knew, and there's some quite famous people—U Hla Myint and U Aye Hlaing—who were actually world-renowned, or at least internationally known economists, and I tried to do some sort of economic series. Then I realized that the statistics were completely bogus, by and large, and I then decided, you can't do economic research unless the statistics are roughly right, and so, I abandoned that and threw myself basically at Burmese and so on.

01-00:37:59

Holmes:

Your time in Burma, as well as the other traveling you did with the National Student Association in these other countries, how did this begin to inform your view and understanding of the Global South? You would spend much of your career writing on the Global South in so many respects; how did your understanding of their experience start to take shape?

01-00:38:31

Scott:

So, I'm remembering things that I've not been conscious of, as a result of your questions. So I don't think, for me, I don't think I had a sense of the history of Southeast Asia, of Burma, or let's say the Bandung Conference, and Sukarno. When I went to Burma, I went with a level of naïveté that would be hard to exaggerate, but see Burma was not all that cosmopolitan. It's not as if I learned about the Global South in Burma, although I observed the Global South, if you like. It was really striking. So everything, the ethnicities, Burma culture, you just take in that stuff, and you have to put yourself back to—what are we talking about—1959, '60.

So, it's an experience that many people didn't have. And then, I actually went to Jakarta to interview students for a fellowship program that the National Student Association had. I went to Jakarta and Bandung, so I had a little Indonesian experience, and then I went to what was then East Pakistan, Dhaka, and I went to Singapore. In Singapore, I got to know the Socialist student union people, the sort of so-called Dunham Road Hostel, many of whom became very important politicians later on, and personal friends in some cases. So at the end of my Burma year, I saw, if you like, student politics in three or four different places, and including—we're talking '60, and so I met the sort of Communist leaders of the CGMI, which was the Communist student union in Indonesia, most of whom were killed after '65, and so on.

So I got this sense for a kind of quasi-revolutionary, tumultuous politics, particularly in East Pakistan and in Indonesia. In Singapore, I knew a guy, the beginning of the Lee Kuan Yew regime, or maybe he was running for election and so on. So Singapore was a rather more subtle place, and I remember loving the food in Singapore because as I said, I lost thirty-five pounds in Burma, and I can remember Singapore food as being, it's all I could do to not just grab it with my hands rather than serving spoons, or chopsticks.

01-00:41:42
Holmes:

Well you decided, I believe in 1961, after your work in Burma with the National Student Association, to begin studying for your PhD. How did that decision come about, particularly when you had the entrance into Harvard Law, and in some respects, one of the first out of the family who had a letter from Harvard, as your dad was always—

01-00:42:10
Scott:

Oh that's true actually—I'd never thought of that, but I was. I could have done that, yeah. So, when I got back from Burma, I had already gotten to know Louise before I left for Burma, and when I told her that I was actually going to go to Paris for the next year, she thought, "Well fine, goodbye," and I realized I had to do the Paris thing anyway, so, we thought that was the end of us. So I decided, if you like, after Burma, not to go to Harvard Law School, and then, when I was in Paris, I actually went to Sciences Po, was an auditor in several courses. I got to know people studying China and the Third World. That's where I began to get a sense for people who were studying the Global South, and I realized that I didn't want to do law school, and so I applied to the economics department at Yale, with the idea that I'd go back to sort of studying Southeast Asia, Burma, economic development, and so on, and I was accepted. And so I decided, the hell with law school, going to go [to Yale], and then I postponed that because I got elected vice president of the National Student Association.

The economics department at Yale wanted me to do a second year of calculus. I'd done calculus at Williams, first year, and they wanted me to do a second

year before I entered. I had a chance to go with a trade union delegation and student delegation to Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia and Morocco, and Tunisia, in the summer, rather than doing a second year of calculus. And so I wrote to the economics department at Yale and said, "Can you let me do the second year of calculus as a part of my first semester at Yale? Because I've never had trouble with mathematics," and the person who wrote me said, "No," and it was James Tobin, actually, a Nobel Prize winner. I appealed, and they said, "No. Unless you arrive with your second year of calculus, we don't want you." So, I then said, "Would you send all my stuff over to the political science department and see if they'll have me?" and they did, and political science would have me, so that's how come I'm a political scientist.

01-00:45:08

Holmes:

Oh wow. [laughter]

01-00:45:10

Scott:

So that's weird, right? So, the idea, for people who are paying attention to this who don't know what they're going to do with their lives—I told you the story of how I came to spend a year in Burma by sheer stumbling around, and the fact that I'm a political scientist was just as crazy as my year in Burma.

01-00:45:42

Holmes:

All over a calculus class, the calculus class that changed your life, in some regards.

01-00:45:46

Scott:

Yeah, right, right, exactly. And so the straight line of how I became a political scientist working on Southeast Asia was actually like a stumbling drunk.

01-00:46:07

Holmes:

Now, when you arrived eventually as a political scientist student, you begin to work with Robert E. Lane here at Yale. Did you have a desire to specialize in Southeast Asia at that time, or were you open to a number of possibilities?

01-00:46:32

Scott:

I knew I wanted to work on Southeast Asia. Yale had actually a fairly famous bunch of Southeast Asianists as well, including, when I started, a guy named Carl Lande, who worked on Southeast Asia. And so, I knew I wanted to work on Southeast Asia, and it should be said that my training at Williams was kind of classical political science, and behavioralism had just sort of exploded, and the Yale political science department was deep into a belief in behavioralism, even though for the most part, they didn't practice it, they believed in it, and that is: "We're not interested in theory. We're not interested in abstractions. We want to explain political behavior, what people actually do in politics," and that came with a set of kind of new readings of different, kind of English positivists, philosophy, and so, I was not prepared for the kinds of political science being taught. So we read Karl Popper. We read all the sort of classics of positivism and behaviorism, and I felt kind of blindsided by this, but I'm always, if I rebel against something, it's only because I've convinced myself

that I've mastered it, and then can thumb my nose at it. So, I spent the first two years trying to become a good little boy who knew what they were trying to teach before I began to make any trouble.

And so, it was a very different education for me and Lane, Lane was, in a sense, in charge of the introduction to political science, and he happened to know poetry and art and theater. His wife was a novelist, and he is famous for a book called *Political Ideology*, and it's long, quasi-psychoanalytic interviews with fifteen working-class people in New Haven, about their politics, about what they believe about political life. I was taken by the way you could sort of uncover the hidden principles which infused people's politics. That methodology impressed me. Lane impressed me because he was an amiable, intelligent, broad-minded guy. I did a lot of work on Southeast Asia when I was at Yale, including stuff in history and anthropology, and I decided that I would do a Bob Lane political ideology on Malaysian bureaucrats, and so my dissertation project was exactly that.

01-00:50:11

Holmes:

I want to get to that, because that also became your first book. But before we do, I wanted you to discuss your graduate experience at Yale a little bit. What kind of environment was this for a young political scientist? And especially as one who would go on to create the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale, one of the most renowned interdisciplinary spaces where one can come from a variety of disciplines and exchange ideas—did Yale foster that type of environment at that time?

01-00:50:54

Scott:

No. [laughter] It did not. That is to say, it wasn't as if they weren't borrowing from philosophy and economics. They were, but they had a kind of missionary zeal for positivism, as I said, even though they didn't practice it for the most part. [Robert] Dahl and [Charles] Lindblom, that's not the kind of work that they did; all their questions were socialist questions. And so, they didn't practice what they preached, but they preached like crazy, and they wanted, like a good missionary, the whole man or the whole woman, and they didn't want you wandering off. They would tolerate it, and so I did take a couple of classes that were outside the discipline and I wrote actually a paper for a history seminar that I didn't even get credit for, just because I liked the professor, Harry Benda. So no, it was not particularly understanding or tolerant of interdisciplinary work.

What was interesting to me: I really believed in politics. It's not as if I just didn't want to study it. I was a kind of an activist in the National Student Association. I'd been arrested six or seven times in Civil Rights marches and so on, and so when I arrived at Yale, it was as a sort of leftie as well as a student of political science, and a bunch of us at the very beginning, before our first classes met—it was the Bay of Pigs year, and we decided we'd like to pass a resolution, as an entering class, against the Bay of Pigs Invasion. So we

drafted a resolution, and at the first kind of meeting of faculty and students, we proposed it, and they came down on us like a ton of bricks. They did not want Yale in the news as taking political positions through its political science department, and it ended up, I was the only person voting for the resolution, and my coconspirator who helped draft it, he abstained. And so it was, but all of these people were of course left wing, and so, I think it was probably the first time I found myself—I found myself in the National Student Association in Paris with left-wing companions, but I found myself at Yale with a kind of left-wing faculty, even if they were apolitical in their methodology. And so, the graduate students who I was with all shared pretty much my politics, so, that was the first time I think I was in a setting where both my teachers and my peers were all pretty much left wing.

01-00:54:05

Holmes:

When we look at Robert Lane, he was also an activist for unions. I think he was a part of the Third Selma March in Montgomery as well?

01-00:54:20

Scott:

Yeah, he put his money where his mouth was, right? Yeah, and he was involved in saving lots of Jews and appealing to Roosevelt when he was an undergraduate at Harvard. So, yeah, those are the things he's most proud of. So, yes, he was more politically active, and his wife, Helen Lane—Helen Hudson is her pen name, in terms of the novels that she wrote—she kept him honest too, she was more left wing than he was.

01-00:54:58

Holmes:

Well you mentioned the Bay of Pigs. During your years at Yale was also a continued rising tide of politics when we think of the Cold War, we think of Vietnam, as well as Civil Rights. Could you discuss a little bit about how these issues were addressed on campus, if at all, during your time there at Yale?

01-00:55:27

Scott:

I'm thinking. What was really interesting, I think, is, this becomes even stronger after I leave, let's say 1967. By '69, the striking thing about the Yale faculty—I mean the Yale faculty, as I said, by national standards, a left-wing faculty, and by 1969, most of their students regarded them as reactionaries, hopeless reactionaries, on the wrong side of history and so on. And so they had never had this experience of being flanked on the left, and you could see this, in retrospect, in the air, when I was there. I mean, 1965 are the first draft calls. I was drafted in my first year in graduate school. I went to my preinduction physical, and then in the spring, I got drafted, and in those days, you could get something like a 4-D Deferment. I forget what it was called. It had a numerical designation and a letter, and it was something you could do, invoke, if you were actually in school. You could get a deferment until you finished the school year, and in return for which you gave up any rights to subsequent deferments. So it was just a kind of like, okay, finish the school

year, and then you're dead meat. So I did that, and I got that deferment, and I was never drafted.

Now, I had an experience at the preinduction physical that may have made trouble for me, in the best possible way, in retrospect. So, I'll make this story short, but there was something called the Disclaimer Affidavit. It was part of the McCarthy period and says, "and you have to testify"—this is the very end after you take your intelligence test. The physical part of the preinduction physical is over—I had to go back to New Jersey for this. There was the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations in alphabetical order, starting with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and all of the other people there looked for 4-H, and if it wasn't there, they signed, and I, of course, at this Quaker school—I didn't tell you that a friend—we had an exchange student from Germany, and we listened to Radio Moscow just for fun, in an English service, and we wrote a postcard to Radio Moscow asking for their broadcast schedule to North America because we didn't know when we could get them. About four months after we wrote this postcard, the post office called me, and they said, "We have a big package for you," and I went to the post office and there was like a footlocker that you would take to camp, one of these big ones, and it was filled completely with Communist literature: Lenin, Marx, all of that, every classic of Communist literature. They obviously thought, "Oh, well here is a good little boy that we can raise up into a—" and I was so proud because no one had ever sent me books, let alone a whole fucking footlocker of books. I took it home and my mother completely panicked, and said, "Get rid of it! Get rid of it!" and I went to school and handed out these books to my classmates. [laughter] My mother said, "No, no, no!"

Anyway, in the preinduction physical, at the end when you go through the Attorney General's List—I had gotten publications from all kinds of crazy groups, because I always was interested in this, that, and the other, and so, I had to check many of these boxes that, yes, I got information from this, that, and the other, and everybody else had done their form and turned it in and I was kind of still going through my form. I didn't say a word, and the guy told me to "hurry up." I didn't even reply, because I knew I would get me in trouble, and finally came back and said, "Just write down that you're a Communist," and he grabbed my paper from me, and balled it up and threw it in the wastebasket. I didn't know what to do, but I knew I didn't want to make trouble. This is the Army, if you like, or pre-Army, and he then walked away to control his anger, and another officer came in and gave me the new form, and told me to sign it, to "complete it quickly, because the buses are waiting" to take us all home, and I wasn't even trying to be funny, but I said something. Everyone else was paying attention because they had nothing else to do. They had finished, and so, I said, "I'm going to have to start from the beginning; I've lost my place," and everybody broke into laughter, and this officer walked away.

So I have the feeling that because of that footlocker, that somewhere in my FBI file or whatever, there was this idea that, this guy's not going to be a good soldier. I don't know this for a fact, and I've never asked for my FBI information, redacted version. I'm sure it's very high, because I worked for the CIA, for Christ sakes, right? I have the feeling that the local Selective Service Board, if they had that information, would have said, "He's just going to fuck up the Army, so let's not draft him." Fine with me.

01-01:01:39
Holmes:

During this time, if we look at Vietnam, if we think globally, \decolonization is also happening in the Global South. During your graduate years, did you pay closer attention to this, especially in studying Southeast Asia and that kind of material?

01-01:02:02
Scott:

Sure, all the stuff I was reading—it was the birth of Third World studies, so I was reading stuff on the late colonial period, on independent struggles, on the Vietcong wars of national liberation, early efforts at democracy. So, all of that stuff was very much in the air. Although, I think the kind of total concentration on the Vietnam War only happened—I mean, I arrived in Madison for my first teaching and that was the fall of the so-called Dow Demonstrations at Wisconsin over napalm, and so on—and my friend, this guy Ed Friedman and I taught a class on theories of peasant revolution that we had 400 students, and so, that's when, in a sense, I turned my kind of Burmese economic development studies and became interested in peasant wars, since the basis of the Vietcong and Vietminh were peasants. So peasant wars of national liberation, I became obsessed by that and started reading about peasants in general: medieval peasants, peasants in the French Revolution, peasant revolts in England, you name it.

01-01:03:37
Holmes:

Well, I'd like to talk a little bit about your early scholarship, and particularly your dissertation and first book, which was titled *Political Ideology in Malaysia: Reality and the Beliefs of an Elite*. Before we get to some of the details of the book, what scholars or works really played a significant role in your thinking while you were working on the dissertation and the later finalization of the book?

01-01:04:13
Scott:

So, not as many as ought to have. That is, it's not a good book. It just is not a good book. I didn't realize it at the time. I was flattered that Yale Press published it, and it helped me get my job at Wisconsin, and tenure and so on. I would never tell this to Lane, because he was generous to me to a fault, but I somehow was writing for him in a telephone booth full of other people, in terms of this. There was, in sociology and anthropology in those days—[A.L.] Kroeber—there's this effort of getting the kind of ideological orientation, the sort of first principles of people's political action, to try to understand the core normative beliefs from which everything then is derivative. And so, I came up

with this idea of the "constant pie" we're in, et cetera, from which I thought I could sort of, in a sense, deduce many of their other views. It's not entirely wrong, and it's not that I didn't learn a lot in the process of doing it, but it was based on a rather small pillar of literature about basic beliefs that I read, and it's not as if I was ignorant of Malay history, because I wasn't, but it didn't figure much in the book, and I think the people who were Malaysianists thought it was superficial and had no historical depth.

And so, I have never put together all the reviews of it, but at least half or more of the reviews were quite unfavorable, and I think, in retrospect, most of them were right in their criticism. And so, I think that book is a negative example for graduate students, that you must not be mesmerized by the methods and themes of your major professor. It was something I could grab. It was like a technique of all these long, intensive interviews, and I think I got myself a broader education than that at Yale but I wasn't using it, and so, it was meant to please a narrow little swath of contemporary interests in American political science, and didn't have the kind of breadth that it might have had.

So it's only later I got, thanks to Bob Lane—he ran a psychology and politics program at Yale, and I got a postdoc in '71, I think, and that year, I said to myself, you know what? Yale is guilty of contractual failure to deliver services. That is, they didn't give me the education in Southeast Asian history, and social structure, and culture that I need, and I'm going to spend this year giving myself the education that I didn't get at Yale, and so I spent that whole year really putting under my belt all the classics of Southeast Asian history, and culture, and ethnicity, and so on. And so at the end of that year, I was a Southeast Asianist, and I wrote this piece, which came partly from this guy Carl Lande, the patron-client relations. It helped me because it was an *American Political Science Review* article, and then another on machine politics as well in the APSR. After that, I think, you could say that I had given myself the training that I ought to have had in an interdisciplinary way at a university that was thinking of, how can we equip this guy to do his job?

01-01:09:06

Holmes:

Well I want to talk about those other studies in our next session, because I think you're right, it's an important turning point in your thinking and your career. The first book, which I was doing the math—this year marks the 50th anniversary of its publication with Yale.

01-01:09:25

Scott:

So it does.

01-01:09:27

Holmes:

And in that argument, while you're using this methodology, is it fair to say you're trying to highlight that the political beliefs are coming less from culture than they are also from the actual environment itself, where the constant pie begins to take hold? The constant pie is actually still cited today.

01-01:09:53

Scott: Seriously?

01-01:09:54

Holmes: Yes.

01-01:09:55

Scott: Wow. I mean, because the British made fun of it, because their metaphor is the cake, the national cake, and so the idea that I should talk about a constant pie, they found that amusing and very American and—right, anyway.

01-01:10:11

Holmes: And in the fieldwork for this, well, that you went over there using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative kind of methodologies to conduct fieldwork, I think, in Kampong Bharu?

01-01:10:29

Scott: Yeah, Kampong Bharu means new *kampong*, new village.

01-01:10:33

Holmes: And you interviewed seventeen civil servants during that time. So that wasn't really ethnographic fieldwork like you would do later on—

01-01:10:46

Scott: It was in government offices for the most part, but actually now that you mention it, we started out in the kind of elite suburb of Kuala Lumpur, a place called Petaling Jaya, and renting a sort of independent little house, and the people who rented it to us, the husband had gone to the University of Wisconsin. So we settled in, and my wife was an art historian interested in art, so we went to lots of Malay art galleries, and we got to know this sort of like bohemian world. I got to know this guy named Masli Som, who was an artist, and there was a British guy who I got to know who was a lord: Gathorne Medway, Lord, a real fucking lord. He's the world's expert on edible birds' nests and bats in Borneo, and this Malay whom I met was the artist who would do all the sketches of the bats that Gathorne Medway had collected for his illustrated volume.

Anyway, through him, the reason I'm mentioning this is that, I had a kind of nativist impulse, and so I knew I did not want to live in Petaling Jaya, and I knew this was not a Malay world. So we were the second people ever to get permission to live in Kampong Bharu, because it was a Malay Reserve Area, and there was an anthropologist already there, who was the first person to live there, and we got permission to live there and moved in. So we lived in a kind of Malay area, a kind of sort of run-down, interesting—it was a wonderful place. And so, I didn't do fieldwork in Kampong Bharu, but unlike the rest of the expatriates, we were actually in a Malay area, and it was far more interesting on a day-to-day basis of understanding the way in which the Malays lived and operated, and so on, so.

01-01:13:16

Holmes:

The anthropologist you met—you mentioned him in the forward of the book—he introduced you to anthropological literature that had some bearing on your fieldwork. Was that some of your first or initial dive into reading anthropology and thinking about anthropology?

01-01:13:39

Scott:

Yeah, Ron Provencher. He was; he later taught at Northern Illinois, and as a fine anthropologist, actually worked on cartoons and things, and he was just a large-spirited, nice guy, and his wife was very down home as well. I mostly listened to the work that he was doing, and so, what I knew about Kampong Bharu was probably at least as much influenced by what he told me, because he'd been there for a longer time, than what I observed myself.

So, actually now that you think of it, well, the other thing that was important to me is that, there's a guy named—I don't know if I mentioned him—Wang Gungwu, who became then kind of famous for running an Asian institute in Singapore. He was a Malaysian Chinese, but he was head of the history department there, and there was a famous history department series of talks, and Wang Gungwu just accepted everyone and encouraged their research, and I mean, he knew so much. He's such a bright and interesting guy. I have the feeling he would have been entitled to just tell me to go fuck myself and never darken his door again, because I was so naïve while he was a really fine historian and remains a fine historian. I think he's still alive. And so, he had this seminar every week, and I met historians working on Malaysia, anthropologists working on Malaysia. So that seminar, because of his welcoming everybody under one big tent and so on, that was a kind of education in what it meant to be a serious area specialist in the kinds of things you would want to know. So, that was fortunate; living in the Kampong Bharu and Wang Gungwu were a different kind of formation for me. Actually, I like this interview because I'm realizing things that fit that I didn't realize before.

01-01:16:06

Holmes:

Well I wanted to talk a little bit about what you call the "constant pie orientation." How did you come up with this idea, and put it to use for the dissertation and first book?

01-01:16:26

Scott:

I'm thinking. I believe there's an anthropologist named George Foster who has a fairly famous article on—I forget what he calls it, but it might as well be "The Constant Pie Orientation."¹ It's not that, but it's a zero-sum game, so, if someone is getting ahead, it means that someone else is losing out. There's no such thing as a win-win situation, and he then carries that on to questions of theories of blood, that you only have so much blood. I gather that the

¹ Foster, George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 67, No. 2, (1965), 293–315.

techniques of Yogas, the idea that you have only so much vital fluid which is sperm, and it's at the back of your head, and every time you ejaculate, that's so much less life force you have—and so a lot of the Yoga techniques are a way of either preventing ejaculation or taking back the ejaculation by special training and so on, and stopping all the orifices of your ears, and eyes, and nose, and mouth, and anus, so that you're not losing these vital fluids. Anyway, I'm pretty sure that I found that after I invented this little idea of the constant pie orientation for Malaysian bureaucrats, and yeah, I was kind of full of myself because it seemed to explain a lot of stuff, and a kind of world before the assumption of progress, if you like, of constantly expanding the universe of goods and services and so on that we can all progress.

01-01:18:43

Holmes:

Well, another way of putting it was a type of politics of scarcity, right, that things weren't going to get better, so this is it, in a sense, and tying that to political ideology.

01-01:19:01

Scott:

Right, right, right.

01-01:19:09

Holmes:

Now you said it had mixed reception, but did people, even your advisors and other colleagues, did they take your constant pie—

01-01:19:23

Scott:

Seriously? I actually think that is one of the reasons I got a pass in political science—I didn't get a pass in Southeast Asian studies. So it's usually the people who were historians of Malaysia and so on, outside of political science, they didn't like the book, by and large, and the reason I was cut slack and got a pass and didn't get much criticism is because this was the day when the world was discovering the Global South, the Third World, and anybody who could stand up and put one sentence behind another and continue to breathe, and who worked on the Third World [could get a job.] So when I was looking for a job, I was offered a job at Michigan, a job at Wisconsin, a job at MIT. I hated the MIT job because they were so tied in to the Pentagon and grants and so on. I interviewed at Chicago but was not offered a job at Chicago. Geertz was there then, by the way, although he was a backer of my work. And so it was essentially between Wisconsin and Michigan, and I think the reason I got the job is that everybody thought, oh, we have to have a specialist on the Third World, and what do we know about the Third World? Maybe the constant pie orientation, that's right, is important in scarcity, and these poor fucking countries, and so, I have the feeling that everybody said, "It sounds plausible. We'll go with that."

01-01:21:15

Holmes:

Well it seemed to work out pretty well for you.

01-01:21:18

Scott:

Yeah, well, actually, it worked out structurally in a way that I find myself telling students that I postponed looking for a job for a year, which meant that I finished the dissertation in like, April. I started on a couple of articles in the summer, and then I went to Wisconsin to teach, and by October or November of my first year of teaching, I had a book contract from Yale Press. By that time, we had two kids, and the anxieties of, will I have a job next year or the year after, were more or less allayed. There were eight of us who got a job in political science the same year, so you can imagine, huge expansion, and we all came in like Marine recruits, and we were too much to swallow. The department became radically different very quickly. But, most of my colleagues hadn't finished their dissertation, and were teaching and were newly married, maybe or maybe not with kids, and so, most of those people, either they didn't get tenure but saved their marriage, [laughs] or they saved their marriage and didn't get tenure, or they lost both of them.

And so, Louise started graduate school, and I was able to give the time, because I wasn't sort of worried. In order to do cooking and cleaning and taking care of the kids, I had more liberty than most of my colleagues, and it's not as if I planned it that way, but the fact that my dissertation was done and I had a book contract when I began teaching made my life more relaxed, helped keep our marriage together, et cetera, et cetera.

01-01:23:31

Holmes:

Well, we'll pick that up in our next session. I think that's a good place to start, with your time in Wisconsin.

01-01:23:37

Scott:

Okay.

01-01:23:38

Holmes:

All right, thanks Jim.

01-01:23:38

Scott:

Good.

Interview 2: September 22, 2018

02-00:00:05

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes again with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 22, 2018, and I am here for my second session with James C. Scott for his oral history, which is part and parcel of the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. We are still here at his farm in the lovely town of Durham, Connecticut. Jim, when we left off last time, we talked about your first work, and finishing up at Yale, and you discussed the options you had on the job market, where you ultimately chose Wisconsin. I want to talk a little bit about your experience there, but before that I wanted to just ask: you had the options of MIT, Michigan, and Wisconsin, how did you ultimately choose Wisconsin?

02-00:01:02

Scott:

I chose Wisconsin for two reasons. I had a good friend there in political science named Crawford Young who was a student of Africa and North Africa, whom I knew from National Student Association days. I also chose it—so, I didn't want to go to MIT. There was a guy who ran the department, Ithiel de Sola Pool, was a very well-known political scientist, and he made it clear to me that MIT on the grant-making model expected all of their faculty to devote half of their time to contract research for the Pentagon, and also help raise money by getting new contracts, and that's the last thing in the world I wanted to do. Didn't want to have anything to do with the Pentagon; didn't want to have anything to do with having to raise money, and so, I ran away from that. And then, it was essentially a choice between Wisconsin and Michigan, and I can actually tell you the moment in which I decided that I was not going to go to Michigan and going to go to Wisconsin instead.

I had an interview, and there was a sociologist—whose name escapes me for the moment—who was very anxious to recruit me, and was very helpful. And the person who did Southeast Asia international relations at Michigan was a guy named Russell Fife, I think, and there was a dinner with Russell Fife and four or five of his students. I still remember that he was dressed in a complete suit with a matching tie and handkerchief in his chest pocket, extremely formal, and four of his graduate students were dressed exactly the same way, not with the same pattern of the tie, but matching tie. And I thought, holy mackerel, this is not a laidback place, and these people have kind of a business attire, and a kind of business attitude. Wisconsin had this progressive tradition politically, and it wasn't this big capital. I liked Madison, even though it was colder than Ann Arbor, and I guess I decided that I knew that I was going to be politically active against the Vietnam War, and I knew that the University of Wisconsin had protected its people against McCarthy, and that it had this progressive tradition. In the New Deal, as you know, a lot of people from Wisconsin were instrumental. They moved to Washington and essentially did Wisconsin policy on a national level. And so, I knew enough about that, that I

thought, well this is a place where I'm likely to find more soul mates and that will protect my politics.

In fact, there's a dean, Leon Epstein, who, after I became politically active, desperately wanted to get rid of me, who was later president of the American Political Science Association, and he did everything in his power to drive me out, including much later, when I got an offer from Yale. My department chairman insisted that I tell them about the offer so that Wisconsin could make a counteroffer, and I said to my chair that it was not about money, so, it was a waste of time, and he said, "No, you must give us a chance to respond." They sent it to this dean who wanted to get rid of me who was also a political scientist, and so my counteroffer from Wisconsin was my proposed Yale salary minus \$100. [laughter] So, it was a fine Italian hand and it was meant to insult me and say, "We'd like to see the back of you, Scott." I was going anyway, at that point, but I thought it was an indication of how badly he wanted me gone—he had said to me at a party, "Scott, if we didn't need people like you and your ilk around here, we would—" He never finished the sentence, but kind of trailed off, but he was dedicated to getting rid of me.

02-00:05:46

Holmes:

Well, I'd like to talk a little bit about your experience there at Wisconsin. Maybe we should start with, what were your initial impressions and experience of the political science department there?

02-00:06:00

Scott:

So, what was unique is that often people are hired, individually, of course, they're hired, but they come with one or two other people who are entering, and for some reason, this was a moment of Wisconsin expansion, and there were eight of us coming the same year as beginning assistant professors. And so we were like, as I say, a basic training class, all came in together, and we were, I think the whole department could not have been more than thirty-five or so, and so we were too much, in a sense, to swallow, and assimilate, and acculturate, and it was the Vietnam War. And so, my department, as I experienced it, was by and large the department formed by the eight of us who all came in at the same time, and many of us had left-wing politics, not all of us, but enough—Ed Friedman worked on China; guy named Fred Hayward later fired for sexual harassment, who was an Africanist; guy who had been there before, Charles Anderson, who worked on Latin America. I felt that there were people who were interested in the same things that I was, and there was a Southeast Asian program as well; a guy named John Smail, who was a great Indonesianist, who was there as well, not very well known, but very smart, interesting guy.

02-00:07:50

Holmes:

Well you mentioned Vietnam, and if my dates are correct, you come into Wisconsin in the fall of 1967, right when the Dow Chemical protests on campus were happening, since I think Dow has a major facility right there, at least close by in Wisconsin, if I'm correct.

02-00:08:11

Scott: Maybe, I don't know. I just remember the demonstrations because I was sort of at them on the periphery.

02-00:08:19

Holmes: Discuss your experience with the antiwar activism on campus, and maybe the, I guess, response that you received from the administration.

02-00:08:31

Scott: Well, there were, starting with the Dow Demonstration—I think that the Vietnam War—again, I came in 1967. That's after the conscription that started in 1965, and so there was a tremendous amount of agitation against the war: demonstrations, riots, battles with the police. The key Dow Demonstration took place in a building adjacent to the political science building, in which a bunch of students, who were being pushed by the police, ended up in a cul-de-sac in which they had nowhere to go, and many of them were hurt. No one was killed I think, but they were hurt just because of the packing of the people behind them trying to get away from the police.

And so, I was, after all in a political science department, and I was teaching Southeast Asia, and because of the Vietnam War, this colleague and I started teaching this class on theories of peasant revolution, and we had something like 400 students. We had microphones that people would struggle to get to. I think I've said this in another interview: people were so passionate about this issue that there were fifty or sixty students who thought we, Ed Friedman and I, were not progressive enough, and they went away from each lecture and wrote a critique of three or four, five pages, which they mimeographed, in those days, and handed out to all the students at the next class. So, it was a class filled with kind of passionate interest, and so on. Some of those people in those classes were implicated in the Army Math Bombing, the bombing at Wisconsin of the Army Math Research Center.²

And so, I had done some work on corruption, which is the second book I worked on when I was at UW. I had also worked on patron-client relationships, as you recall, and patron-client relationships are like feudal relationships in which peasantry is tied to an aristocrat, a land owner whom he presumably feeds, and they are his loyal entourage, and so on. It looks like feudal structures, and I got this idea that, to understand peasant revolution was to understand why these feudal structures broke down, and you then had a peasantry that was unprotected, and in which their class interest were smothered by these vertical ties of patronage. That made me interested in the breakup of a feudal order in Europe, and since all the great literature on peasantry is basically European literature, I actually decided in the second year at UW, perhaps, or third year—I can't remember exactly when—I decided that the peasants were the most numerous class in world history, and if development didn't mean something for them, fuck development, and I

² The bombing of Sterling Hall at the University of Wisconsin–Madison occurred on August 24, 1970.

decided that I would devote my career, for the time being, anyway, to the study of the peasantry. I decided I wanted to know everything I could about peasants. So it was actually, I can't say that on Monday I made this decision, but in the course of the Vietnam War and doing all the speaking against the Vietnam War, and reading about Vietnam and reading about peasantry, I decided that this is something. This was a worthy way to use my mind, and maybe understand some things and be helpful, and so I, in a sense, became a peasantist in that way.

02-00:13:01
Holmes:

I want to get to those articles and discuss that kind of intellectual development, but before we do, you have stated before that the Land Tenure Center, there at Wisconsin, really aided your education, or at least helped further your understanding about peasants and agriculture. Can you talk a little bit about your interaction with that center?

02-00:13:26
Scott:

You probably know something about the "Wisconsin idea," as it's called historically, and so Wisconsin, although I didn't have much connection with it, it has a big agricultural school, and it had then a department of rural sociology, it had this history of agricultural extension, and extension work in general. So, I'm deviating a little from your question, but the interesting thing about the University of Wisconsin is that when I was there, you couldn't find anybody in Wisconsin who had not benefited in some way from the existence of the university. Wherever they were in Wisconsin, they'd either taken a course, they'd met agricultural extension agents, and so on, so, the university had a tremendous amount of legitimacy, unlike Yale, for example, which looks down its nose at Connecticut.

And so there was something kind of charismatic about the university that I came to sort of understand and admire, and the Land Tenure Center was essentially that part of rural sociology and economics that were interested in land reform, and peasant welfare, and they had a bunch of talks. Eugene Havens was there; I think the center is named after him now. And so, I found myself going to a lot of events at the Land Tenure Center and paying attention to land tenure. I think I mentioned the other day, as I recall it, we had to teach two courses a semester—or was it three? I think two—and they bought out one course for me so that I could do a course on peasants that I could devote all my time to, just making that course a good course. And so, they helped me, if you like. First of all, they shared my politics about land reform, and they had enough money, then, to make this gesture in my direction that allowed me to develop my course on peasants that became a kind of important part of my teaching career.

02-00:16:01
Holmes:

You mentioned the role of agriculture, not just in the state, but also at the University of Wisconsin, which was one of the nation's first land-grant

universities. Was it within this environment that you started to develop an interest in agriculture?

02-00:16:20

Scott:

No. It's interesting. Because I was a poor kid after my father died, I did a lot of agriculture labor. I mean like bracero kind of labor: I picked cherries, I picked green beans, I picked tomatoes, I picked and packed corn, I picked and packed peaches, all on a couple of farms of people I knew well and that had known my father and wanted to hire me just because they were kind of sympathetic to me. And so my agriculture experience was stoop labor that I was grateful to have. I mean, we used to take tomatoes to Campbell Soup's factory in Camden, and so on, but I don't think I had any intellectual interest in agriculture at that point. It was just work and money and something I needed to be able to sort of help my mom, and earn a little extra money, and even today, you'll notice that aside from hay, I don't actually grow much except in a small garden. What I became interested in later on is animal husbandry. I was raising; I've done sheep and goats and cows and so on, and somehow, livestock has always been of more interest to me than actual agriculture, even though they're related.

02-00:18:07

Holmes:

Well, I'd like to shift a little bit and talk about some of your early work in that intellectual development towards a focus on peasant politics. Your first book looked at the state, namely civil servants, but at Wisconsin, as you were just describing, we see a growing focus and interest in the peasantry, which resulted in a series of works. Maybe the first to talk about is your second book, *Comparative Political Corruption*. Now builds off an earlier article around the same subject a little bit.

02-00:18:51

Scott:

Correct, and machine politics, and so, you can see the connection. That is, in a sense, the question is, how are lower classes tied to elites rather than to their own class interest, and machine politics is that example in which the machine boss helps people fill out their immigration paperwork, gives them a turkey at Christmas, helps them navigate the bureaucracy, knows who to contact, helps them get jobs. It's the kind of thing without the violence that the Godfather does, and so it seemed to me that you can see that my interest in feudalism and how it breaks down, and my interest in machine politics, had to do with the way in which: does the peasantry package their class politics, or are they englobed in vertical relationships, either to machine bosses, or to feudal masters and so on?

So it had that kind of similarity to it, and I had actually finished my research in Burma, in Kampung Baru, before I came back. I had like a month and a half or two, and so, I would help people fill out forms, because they were mostly in English or Malay, that they didn't understand. I had a white shirt, and a fountain pen, and early on during my stay in the village, someone was going to the hospital who was sick, and their father or mother who were

taking them asked me if they could borrow the fountain pen and the white shirt, because if you had a white shirt and a fountain pen, it suggested you were a clerk or you had a government job, or at least you had influence, and they better not fuck with you. So I ended up loaning out my white shirt for anyone who went to the hospital. Word got around. I would loan out my white shirt and the fountain pen that they would then wear to the hospital so they went to the front of the line and weren't treated shabbily, and so on. Then, I got to know from these people how, at the hospital, they had to bribe for a bedpan, for their medicine, for clean sheets, and so I became interested in corruption, and I actually hired a couple of students at the University of Malaya to go and interview people who were waiting in line for this and that and the other.

So I never used that material, but I had like a little kind of survey material that I did in the last month and a half that I was there that were the basis for what might have been an article on Malaysian corruption. Then I read machine politics and other stuff on corruption, and I think my only contribution to that—which I think is not trivial, but it's not a big deal—is that for peasants and ordinary people, they don't have any influence on legislation. That's done over their heads, outside their view, and the only influence they have is what I call "influence at the enforcement stage." The only thing they can do to have an effect on the law is make sure it either applies to them if it's favorable or it doesn't apply to them if it's unfavorable. And so bribes, at that level, are like the only influence that people have. These are a larger system that works to their disadvantage by and large, and so I became a fan of certain kinds of petty corruption, because it seemed to me to be the only instrument people had in dealing with the state to sort of fend it off.

02-00:22:51

Holmes:

And, in many respects, this is also a kind of writing against the grain of the interpretation many other Western scholars had towards that.

02-00:23:00

Scott:

Yeah. So it is a counter narrative which people claim I'd always do, and I didn't see it that way at the time, but it is a counter narrative, definitely, right.

02-00:23:14

Holmes:

In your work on machine politics, you've also said that machine politics in many respects was a conservative response to change. Discuss a little bit more how you started getting into machine politics, because you also give a comparative look at how this system operates in different nations, like the United States, which was more notorious for machine politics than others.

02-00:23:51

Scott:

Yes. Actually, I'm remembering something that Eric Hobsbawm says, that I came across later—I have it, it may not be perfect, but it's close. He says that "peasants strive to work the political system to their minimal disadvantage," the idea that the system is essentially against them, and their job is to divert,

obstruct, make sure the worst doesn't happen. So they're not going to win, but they can minimize their losses in the political system, and that's a way in which it's conservative. I mean machine politics, if you like, its conservative side is that it protects people—it's like a social welfare system that the New Deal replaced by programs of entitlement and so on. You had to have these personal relations and you became loyal, and it tied you to essentially a reactionary set of elites who might be helping you with a turkey and with your forms and so on, but they were also giving money to the streetcar interests, and selling out municipal bonds at prices that were disadvantaging the population. The reason they were able to get away with it is that they were able to buffer people from the sort of winds of political and economic change, and therefore encourage their loyalty and gratitude. The interesting thing is, in places like Milwaukee where you had socialists running things, you actually had early entitlements that actually were more beneficial, and in which the corruption wasn't deeply involved. So I saw it as a conservative response, and reactionary in the large sense, but understanding the way in which people could be enmeshed in that system.

02-00:26:35

Holmes:

When you began to dive further into looking at the peasantry, and peasant politics, who were some of the intellectual influences that helped you with that transition, particularly as a trained political scientist? Yet it seems while still focusing on politics, you're starting to step a little bit outside of the poli-sci bubble, if you will.

02-00:27:00

Scott:

It's a good point, and it's really relevant because there are three people—I'm trying to remember exactly, or four people. Before I went to graduate school, actually, a friend of mine from Oberlin who was involved in student politics said, "The book you must read before you start graduate school is Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*," which I did. Probably one of the most influential books I've ever read, and still, I think, a great book to teach. I noticed that students love it, actually, and I didn't expect them to. I read E. P. Thompson, and I can't remember which of the first books because I think it wasn't until later that I read *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Marc Bloch, a French historian on peasants and feudalism. I read that very early, because I thought, I need to understand this if I'm going to work on peasants. And then, somebody whom you would not know: A. V. Chayanov, who wrote a book called *On the Theory of the Peasant Economy*. He was a student of the sort of Swiss school of household studies in which every penny that's spent, everything that you plant, the labor distribution in the family over the agriculture year—they were meticulous students of household economies, and Chayanov wrote this thing, *On the Theory of the Peasant Economy*, very influential, and Daniel Thorner wrote the introduction to the translation. It was a Frenchman who I think did the translation.

Anyway, that was influential to me as well, and none of those things were things that would have been on the syllabus of any political scientist I knew at the time. So, I was already wandering off the plantation at that point.

Well then I did, since I was interested in wars of national liberation and rebellion, I did *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, and that was a library work. I wrote a good deal of it when I was in France, when Louise was doing her dissertation in art history and I was just father of the family there. It was not only the first book that made me visible in a certain sort of field of social sciences, but it also, I realized, in order to do that, I had to read lots of anthropology, and I realized that I could not call myself a peasantist unless I did field work, unless I went to some actual village and spent a couple of years there. So at least I knew one place like I knew the back of my hand, so that every time I was tempted to make some generalization, I actually knew peasant life, at least closer than I would have if I was just reading stuff.

02-00:30:40
Holmes:

You mentioned anthropology, and I want to talk about *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, but there were two articles that really dovetailed with that, which was your work on the patron-client model. Now this is a model that first was developed by anthropologists.

02-00:30:56
Scott:

Correct.

02-00:30:56
Holmes:

Discuss that a little bit. I know you touched on it just a few minutes ago, but discuss the genesis of that work, and exploring that subject for you.

02-00:31:09
Scott:

Well, patron-client relationships are vertical relationships that tie different classes together, and so, they are the opposite of class solidarity, because they're interclass relationship. The person who taught me all of that is this guy, Carl Lande, who was at Yale when I was a graduate student. I think I was in at least two courses with him where he worked out, in some detail, how patron-client organizations create different forms of organization, different forms of mobilization that are unique in their way. I then decided I wanted to show how it was a completely different form than class mobilization. So I took Lande's stuff, and I think Lande, actually, when I published something in the *American Political Science Review*, I sent it to him.

I was a student at Yale. I went to do my field work in Malaysia, and I came back, and Lande had been fired, or not given tenure, or whatever. I remember saying to [Robert] Lane, "What happened to Carl Lande?" and he said, "Oh, I don't know. We fired him." And I thought, well this is pretty fucking callous, to sort of not even know where the guy went, as if, "We fired him, so he's not our responsibility anymore." He went to Kansas, actually, and I remain in touch with him and when I published, when I had done a draft of this patron-

client relationship stuff, which gave him credit, but also extended it, he was angry with me, I think, that I was going to publish in the *American Political Science Review* before he did on patron-client relationships. He saw himself as the father of patron-client relationship analysis, and I was doing something quite different. As to make amends with him, there was this other book that you may not have heard of—*Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (1977)—that we did with him and two other people, Steffen Schmidt and Laura Guasti. It was just an edited volume of all the best stuff on patron-client relationships and factionalism, and so on, and we gave Lande the sort of lead article so that he wouldn't feel that I had dissed him. He worked on the Philippines, and he deserved, I think, more respect from Yale than he got. But it was a difficult relationship for me because he felt that his student was putting him in the shadow, and that I should just not publish on patron-client relationships until he'd published everything, but this was like five years after I had been taught by him.

02-00:34:57

Holmes:

In this relationship, one of the things that you hit on which becomes a key point in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* that you published in 1976, was reciprocity, that type of balance and redistribution in those relationships, and how the colonial state begins to erode that.

02-00:35:19

Scott:

Right, exactly. And in fact, I in a sense owe the point of departure to Lande as well, in the sense that, it seemed to me that you get a revolution when these vertical ties break down. You get the French Revolution when the elites are no longer protecting the peasantry against commerce and other things. So, it seemed to me, you don't get class politics until feudal structures break down, and then I tried to work out, by reading all of the history and anthropology around this stuff, about how these structures do break down. What was kind of new that Lande just wasn't interested in at all was the idea that those forms of taxation that have no respect or variability vis-à-vis the agricultural year, and how the crops are going, and so on, like a head tax, that's the same. As long as you have a head, you have a head tax, and it doesn't matter whether you had a good year or a bad year or whether the crops have failed, et cetera, whether there's a famine, and so on. And so, I understood that the states wanted, if you like, a steady tax that would give them the same revenue that they could depend on year after year after year, and that that kind of tax was the worst possible tax for peasants, because it didn't vary with their actual conditions year by year. And so, the taxes, and if you go to the French archives, it's those taxes that are the most hated.

02-00:37:10

Holmes:

Well let's talk a little bit about *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. By all accounts, it was a groundbreaking work that really placed you at the center of an emerging field of peasant studies. This built on your previous work that you had undertaken at Wisconsin. Maybe discuss a little bit how you came up

with the term "moral economy," and the kind of ingredients that you lay out in the book of how this operates.

02-00:37:40

Scott:

I'm not sure I'm happy with the title, and if I could go back, I would change it, but the title is just all in from E. P. Thompson. After I had written the book, I read E. P. Thompson's "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," and it seemed to me that, in a sense, he understood that, in terms of the market, and the way the market was organized, that there were these same efforts to protect people against the worst outcomes in the market. The title, originally, for that book was *Exploitation: A Victim's Perspective*, and then it would be *Resistance and Subsistence in Peasant Society*, something or other. I was so taken by E. P. Thompson's article that I said, "I'm going to call it *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*," and I think that was partly responsible for the success of the book.

On the other hand, as you know, there was a whole book written to refute it by Sam Popkin, and a lot of people who didn't read the book assumed that I had a theory of altruistic peasants who just wanted to help one another, kumbaya, and would share their food. Actually, as you know, it's a sort of theory of organizing life to minimize the maximum loss in the same way, and so it's completely rational behavior. You plant crops so that you don't put all your eggs in one basket so that if one crop fails, you're finished; you trade a kind of possible profit in order to make sure you don't fall below a certain level. So it's like a rational actor. Sam Popkin fancied himself part of the rational choice crowd, and I thought my book was completely compatible with a rational choice; it's just that it was choice under these difficult constraints of worrying about starving, and not having enough to eat. And so, I think that people who didn't read the book carefully thought that I was talking about sentimental, altruistic peasants who weren't acting rationally, when I was talking about extreme versions of ration action.

So, I think the title got me in trouble, in terms of misperceptions for people who didn't read the book carefully. I haven't told anybody about this: Sam was a friend. I got to know him, and he gave me a draft of his book, and my first response was, "Why the fuck are you writing a refutation of my book? No one's going to read my book." I didn't think anyone was going to read my book, and we were, "hitching your wagon to a sort of broken down locomotive here," but I gave him my critique, and he sent me back a revised version, taking into account some of my withering critique, and I was like six or seven pages into my critique of his revised version, and I thought to myself, I remember, that, why the fuck am I helping him in what is essentially an attack on my book? And so I tore up my second critique, and said, "You're on your own, Sam. I'm not going to help you make this better because it's an attack on my work! You figure it out." [laughter] And so, he did, and the fact is that, to be accurate about it, these two books were often taught as it was a natural teaching vehicle, and I think my book and his book did a lot better

than they would have otherwise done, because they were a natural set of twins in order to teach two different ways of understanding peasant rebellion.

02-00:42:35

Holmes:

You start off that book with a great analogy by R. H. Tawney, of a peasant being up to their neck in water, where even the slightest ripple, they would end up drowning. Discuss how that became to really symbolize for you the moral economy, of those two aspects that, it seems like, with all due respect to Sam, that his book missed, that you were talking about, which comes back from the client model, these two very important pillars that seems a lot of Western scholarship was missing, in their understanding about the peasant.

02-00:43:16

Scott:

Right, right. So, for me, of course, I ran across that late in the game too, and I thought, aha, this is the thing I mean, and it turns out—you're the first person to know this—that, Tawney stole it from, I think, someone named Halevy, who did a history of the English people, Elie Halevy, H-a-l-e-v-y—it's a version of Levy, Halevy, and Tawney doesn't give him credit, I might add. And so, I borrowed from Tawney but Tawney had borrowed it from someone else, about the "up to your neck in water, and a ripple will drown you," and actually, if you look at a lot of my books, not all of them, but I try to start it with a kind of vignette of a kind, that give you the sort of core of the argument, and the Tawney quote was perfect for me when I ran across it.

And so, it's not as if it was a conscious procedure of mine, but somehow, I began a lot of my books by finding some little vignette that helps the reader understand the core of the argument. So the little six or seven pages on German scientific forestry in *Seeing Like a State*, you read that and you know what the book is about. Anyway, just, it's an effort to sort of condense it into one sort of small version. I don't do that with *Weapons of the Weak*, for example, and there's some books I don't do it with, but if I have something like that, I find it really useful.

02-00:45:31

Holmes:

You have reservations about the name, but it was also the name itself that also came to really encompass these two pillars of a peasant's—what you say is, "as a peasant, it's the daily activities, not that reciprocity which comes back to the client-patron relations, but also the right to subsistence." Discuss how your thinking on this really developed in this work, particularly when much of the literature was always focused on this type of neoclassical kind of economic model.

02-00:46:12

Scott:

Well, so, although I stumbled across the moral economy article after I'd kind of written it—so, E. P. Thompson doesn't get credit for introducing that—Chayanov is this absolutely meticulous view of all the choices peasants make, marginal peasants, in terms of how to distribute labor, how to exploit their children, how to keep people in the family as long as possible before they

marry out when you lose their labor, what kind of crops to grow, whether they're cash crops or other crops. Chayanov shows you all of these decisions that are made in order to ensure your subsistence and prevent a catastrophe from happening.

So, I think that that, if you like, effort to protect subsistence minima is something I learned almost entirely from Chayanov, because he works it out in extraordinary detail, so that if you've got a lot of labor, for example, he shows you how, if you've got a lot of labor and not enough land, you will pay a kind of outrageous rent for another piece of land, because you've got nothing to do with this labor, and even, it's going to make a tiny little margin, you're going to rent in the land, because you need that extra, and you've got to use that labor for something, and if the land nearby, you have to outbid other people, you'll do it up to that point where it just becomes kind of fruitless and it's a losing proposition. And so, there's a lot of things that neoclassical economics teaches you about supply and demand. So these people are paying above market price, if you like, for land, because they have to find some use for their labor.

Again and again and again, he shows you how the actual decision makings violates neoclassical microeconomic theory, and you just have to understand their rationality as a different form to—I mean, in game theory, this is called "MinMax," which is minimizing the maximum loss as a sort of strategy, as opposed to having the largest gain with a much higher risk. It's risk averse. I think I used that term, right?

02-00:49:26

Holmes:

Mm-hmm.

02-00:49:26

Scott:

Yeah.

02-00:49:28

Holmes:

Well, another term you use, or, I'm not sure if you came up with it or not, but it just makes sense and goes along with this, is "subsistence ethic," where—

02-00:49:41

Scott:

Yeah, I think there sometimes I thought that would be a better title for the book, *The Subsistence Ethic*, and forget about *The Moral Economy* which misleads people.

02-00:50:00

Holmes:

Well I wanted to talk a little bit about—of course, there's massive contributions in this book, and there was also a great reception. It also ended up being this kind of extended debate between you and Sam Popkin, in some respects. [phone rings]

02-00:50:18

Scott:

Can we stop?

02-00:50:19

Holmes: Sure!

[break in audio]

02-00:50:21

Holmes: All right. Well Jim, I wanted to talk a little bit here towards the end of this session on the contributions we were just discussing with *Moral Economy*. Did you see a real shift in the discussions on peasant politics in the peasantry from this book? Or at least, part of your aim was, I know, to accomplish this. Did you see, over the years, an impact on those kind of understandings and discourses?

02-00:51:02

Scott: The short answer is yes, I think. At the time, it was seen as an important intervention into the debate of, when do peasants rebel, and interesting, it was not about revolution; it was about rebellion. So I didn't have much interesting to say about when a revolution is successful, because that depends on a whole series of other things that are going on, in terms of the finances of the state, whether they're involved in an international war, and so on, and that was beyond my—I wanted to understand the precipitating causes for peasants' insurgencies and uprising in kind of traditional, quasi-traditional settings like Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and, there was then a sort of huge debate: that Popkin stuff and my stuff.

And so I think the way in which it was influential is that people began to ask, pretty explicitly, "When do people rebel?" and there's a whole literature—for example, Ted Gurr, *When Men Rebel*, and whether it's the difference between—what is it called? It was called—it's kind of social comparisons in which someone who is doing better than you gets even more better than you, and so, you haven't lost any ground, but the difference between the people you're comparing yourself to when you have got, gone against you, and so there's a sociological term for this, and there's a lot of work on that. It's called "relative deprivation." And so I think I was part of a larger debate about when peasants rebel, and that fell into an even larger debate about: What is the, if you like, core population of a nation?

So, wars of national liberation were largely peasant rebellions, and so what was interesting is that people thought that these rebellions represented the core of the nation, its folk spirit, its history, its basic core population. I wasn't responsible for that in any major sense, but I think it started out, it helped encourage a lot of work on the peasantry in different countries, and how they've been treated, how they evolve, their forms of leadership, structural organization, their crops, and so on. And so, it was part of a debate that consumed rural sociology and ideas about revolution.

02-00:54:12

Holmes: Would you say that this also dovetailed with the rise of a field that would become known as peasant studies?

02-00:54:19

Scott: Yes, although the thing you can thank for that is the Vietnam War, the Algerian Revolution, the revolution in Indonesia, the sort of decolonialize: the revolts in Angola, Mozambique, Guatemala; you name it. So in a sense, the reason people were interested in peasant revolution is because there were a lot of peasant revolutions. The reason why the World Bank thought about land reform, as we were talking the other day, is because it looked like the Communists—the Chinese Revolution, of course, was the granddaddy of them all, and seen as a peasant revolution. And so, this was, if you like, the existential threat to the world capitalist order for a certain time, and so you could say I was following the headlines, an ambulance chaser. So, it's the world that did a lot more to focus people's attention on these things than anything Jim Scott or anybody else did.

02-00:55:37

Holmes: Yeah, I wanted to ask, too: Your book not only offers some good insights into, obviously, and deepens our understanding of the peasantry, but it also puts that kind of in this juxtaposition of its relationship with the state, which your later work would follow up. Was that missing from the literature, or at least that kind of better understanding of—because we're looking at, why do peasants revolt, why do they rebel, but it's also of looking at, not just the politics of the peasantry, but also looking at that politics vis-à-vis the state.

02-00:56:17

Scott: Yeah, I suppose the two, if you like, the two disturbing influences in peasant society in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, at least in the Third World, are both the growth of markets and capitalist exchange, and the growth of the state, whether it's the colonial state or the post-colonial state. And so, in a sense, what happens to most of the peasantry is, for one reason or another, they're now growing commercial crops that can be sold, cash crops, maybe crops that can't even be eaten, like cotton and rubber, what have you, and they are also taxed in a way that never happened before by the state, and regulated, and intruded on by the state, often a corrupt state, and the two are related partly because it's the imposition, as the colonials found out, of cash taxes. One of the ways you get people to plant cash crops is to make them pay cash taxes, so they have to grow something that they can make money from, or else go to town and work for a wage for a certain amount of time in order to be able to pay their taxes. And so the two things work together in a powerful way, and it's not original with me, but I think those are the two things that sort of, if you like, overturn what one might have thought of as a relatively stable feudal order, that's all.

02-00:58:09

Holmes:

Lastly, I wanted to talk a little bit about—you touched on it here a little bit ago, but the debates that emerged between Sam Popkin's and yours. You mentioned in your experience of him writing, in a sense, a book against your book, and asking you to help in the effort. What was that experience like, because as you were mentioning you actually had a friendly relationship with Sam Popkin?

02-00:58:37

Scott:

We never actually debated directly about this, although lots and lots and lots of people—I have a feeling that it got to the point where, if you taught Scott, you taught Popkin too, and so I was asked often to come and talk about that, but something that's a personality trait, I think—I don't know where it comes from—after I've written something, I've given it my best shot, and I'm kind of bored by dwelling on it. I actually had about thirty, forty pages of a long, long article, maybe short book, refuting Popkin, and I thought, wait a minute; he's getting to determine my agenda, and it's going to seem defensive, and I ripped it up and threw it away. I thought, no, I want to do something new and original, and rather than kind of building a wall and hunkering down and defending conquered territory. I thought, no, I'm just going to move on, and give him something else to shoot at if he wants to. I've not ever replied to my critics.

Well there are very few exceptions. I'll tell you, if you don't mind one, I think, amusing story. A lot of people, when I wrote *Weapons of the Weak*, thought this was a betrayal of revolutionary aspirations, that it was forms of foot dragging, and so on, and I'd given up on revolution, and I was an asshole for doing that, and I betrayed the revolution, and so on. And so someone wrote a review of that book and said, at the end of it—it was the standard argument that I had given up on revolution, and "he's going to the dark side and is becoming reactionary," and he said, "And as for Scott's field work, and the problems with that, I don't have time to go into that," and I thought, of things that have pissed me off, that pissed me off a lot, because it was like insinuating a charge that I had done something unethical, or something in my field work, without specifying what the charge was.

And so I thought it was unethical, and I then wrote a reply to the review and the—it was just an argument against his argument about me disavowing revolution, and him being wrong, but at the end of it, I said, "But so and so can't think very straight anyway, but I don't have time to go into that now." All right, I copied his words, and they said, "No, no, no." The people who were the editors of the journal said, "That's insinuating a charge. They can't do that. It's unethical," and I said, "Well you let him do this, and you've got to let me do it," and they said, "Well, we won't let you do it," and I wrote back, and I said, "Well keep my review," and put this little paragraph in: "The editors of this journal have censored a subsequent paragraph by James Scott, and if you would like to have this paragraph, please email him at jamescott@yale.edu,"

and that was so embarrassing to them that they let me put it in. [laughter] But I thought it was as if, someone said to me—they wrote a review and says, as if, "Oh, and I hear that Scott fucks pigs, but I don't have time to go into that right now." And so, I thought that what he had done was really unethical, and it's the only time I kind of lost it, and responded in kind.

02-01:03:27

Holmes:

Well Jim I wanted to talk about *Weapons of the Weak* here in our next session, so maybe this would be the time to take a break, and then we can start on that.

02-01:03:34

Scott:

Good.

[break in audio]

02-01:03:34

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is still September 22, 2018, and we are here with James C. Scott for his oral history, as part of the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. This is the session what we here like to call "session 2.5." We figured if Jim can have a chapter 6.5, then this session should have a ".5" as well, and Jim, I wanted to, in this session, talk about your emerging work on peasant politics, namely *Weapons of the Weak*, and your other subsequent work there on peasant or on hidden transcripts exploring the various versions of resistance, but before we get to that, I just wanted to just talk to you briefly about your return to Yale. So you returned in 1976?

02-01:04:42

Scott:

Right. So, yeah, I was at Wisconsin from '67 to '76, and then came back here starting in September of '76. I had a postdoctoral year here as well, '71, '72, and then '73, '74, we were in Paris for the year while Louise was doing her PhD in art history, and then we came back here, and settled in Durham, which is relatively far from New Haven. There are relatively few Yale people around here, so it was seen as an active disloyalty to Yale to live so far, although I do everything that everybody else does. In any case, I came back with tenure, of course, so I came back without the anxieties that junior people always have at Yale, and as a kind of Southeast Asianist, and I think I came back on the strength of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. They had a position for which they had some money, and it was especially for a Southeast Asianist, and I think it was because *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* had done well that they thought that this was a relatively good bet, that they wouldn't strike out, as they're always worried of doing. And, what else shall I say about coming back?

When I got the offer from Yale, actually, I was very happy at Wisconsin. I liked Wisconsin. Louise liked Wisconsin as well, and I would have been happy to stay at Wisconsin, and I was happy to come here, so I left it up to Louise to decide which she preferred to do, and all her family was on the East

Coast, so she wanted to be back on the East Coast, and worked out fine, and we traded living in Madison, Wisconsin, in town, so to speak, to living all in the country. We decided we wanted to either live in downtown New Haven, or all the way in the country. What we didn't want was the suburbs in between, and so it was this kind of choice, and we moved here partly because they had an open-classroom sort of situation here that was like a kind of Montessori school in the public school, and that's why I moved here.

02-01:07:25

Holmes:

What was your impressions of Yale when you returned? As you were just saying, you had spent a year at Yale on a fellowship. How did the department, at least in political science, as well as the kind of environment of the university, how did it compare to what you recall during your graduate years?

02-01:07:46

Scott:

Many of the same people were still around, so I was kind of welcomed back, and it had a kind of familiarity. I was happy. As you know, Wisconsin is a huge place, and so, I knew I was going to be happy with the graduate students at Yale because they were high quality and there were relatively few of them, and there were just tons and tons of graduate students at Wisconsin, some of them quite good, and some of them mediocre. And so I knew I was going to get my hands on a small number of graduate students who would be competent and very good. What I wasn't looking forward to were the undergraduates whom I didn't know. I had no experience. As a graduate student, you don't interact with undergraduates. I did a class at Wesleyan, actually, when I was writing my dissertation, but I didn't teach Yale undergraduates, and I thought they would be snotty, overprivileged, and lazy, and the fact is, I've had a kind of love affair with young undergraduates. There are some exceptions, but by and large, they're really interesting, hardworking, sometimes actually brilliant. And so, every three or four years, I have a student who I realize, I'm going to learn as much from this student undergraduate as I am going to teach them, and the other thing, of course, about undergraduates is they don't know the ropes, so that they don't know what a stupid question is and what a clever question is, and so they're more inventive and daring in many ways than graduate students, and graduate students have one eye on the greasy pole, and want to do the thing that's right, that's professional, and so on, and so, they're busy looking over their shoulder to make sure they're doing the right thing, whereas undergraduates, maybe because of a kind of privilege, are willing to take risks and do daring things.

So, just to give you one example: I had a student in my rivers class who decided to tell the story of the Cuyahoga River which caught fire in 1960 near Cleveland. It's kind of famous event, and she decided she wanted to tell the history of the Cuyahoga River in which the Cuyahoga River would speak for itself, from this sort of early geological time up through Native Americans, up through the burning of the Cuyahoga River, and she did all her homework and

did a kind of beautiful paper, but no graduate student would have possibly dreamed of doing a paper of that kind.

02-01:10:42

Holmes:

What about the political science department at Yale? Had it changed much since you left? And also that you come back to Yale with a little more experience under your belt than when you left, so, in thinking of, was this a department that was going to be a fit, was it going to be one that would support your intellectual journey and development?

02-01:11:09

Scott:

It's a complicated question because the department was very hospitable. I was well treated. One of the things, for example: When I accepted the offer from Yale, I said, "Look, you must understand that I need to spend time in a Malay village, so I understand that I'm going to have to pay the price for that in terms, I want two years off in a row, in order to spend that time in a Malay village. It's important for my intellectual development," and the chairman at that time said, "Fine, as long as you pay the price by not taking leave for another five years or something afterwards," and I thought, so okay, and when I came, the chairman who had misled me said, "Um, I'm sorry; you can't do that." Well I had a letter from them because I asked them to write me saying it was all right, and I went to see the dean of the graduate school, and I showed him the letter, and I said, "Is this a deal or is this a deal?" and he said, "Of course it's a deal. I can't take that back, so you're free to go for two years."

So, I spent two of my first three years at Yale in Malaysia, and although I was treated extremely well in the department, I realized that my intellectual interests were better met by a kind of interdisciplinary world, and so, they made me chairman of the Southeast Asia Council, and nobody paid any attention to what I suggested, and after a couple of years, I was about to quit because I thought, I can't do anything with the Southeast Asia Council, and then, my wife said, "You know, why don't you just read the work of these people, and convince them that you really admire and know their work?" and I did this one by one. Like eight people, I read as much of the work as I could. I took them to lunch, told them how much I liked their work, and in, except for two cases, it was true. I did like their work. I thought it was quite amazing, and told them so, and had them eating out of my hand. That is to say, all these people are like big fish in a small pond somewhere, and are feeling underappreciated, and I got to know their work, and I realized that's—and as a little sort of, my wife suggested it. It made it possible for me to have a kind of Southeast Asia Council that I was at home with, and we were all working on lots of the similar things, and I was able to do independent reading courses in Southeast Asia and so on.

So I created for myself, not just Southeast Asians, but I went out of my way to create a kind of little collection of people whose work I liked, and with whom I shared interests, and relatively few of those people were in the department.

Some of them were, but a good many of them were not. So, I was, if you like, already something of an outlier in my department in terms of not paying much attention to the kind of central concerns of the discipline then, which were things like rational choice, that I had no time for.

02-01:14:44

Holmes:

Well moving to your work, and your further exploration of peasant politics, in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, you referenced future work that already seemed to be brewing when you wrote that book, but you felt there wasn't space to have that discussion, and you followed that up shortly thereafter, almost the next year, with a two-part piece titled "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition." Discuss the genesis of that work and how that really led to your later explorations.

02-01:15:24

Scott:

You have done your homework. So, there was the Popkin critique of *Moral Economy of the Peasant*. I didn't reply, or I started to reply to that, and then decided not to reply to it, and I had my own critique of that book, which was that I did not do justice to peasant culture and peasant religion. And so, I realized that my own critique was that I didn't understand peasant religion, and I had this idea, and the premise of those two articles, which I still firmly believe, is that every doctrinal religion like Catholicism is different depending on whether archbishops and elites are practicing it, in the city, and its peasant Catholics who believe that twenty Hail Marys will make the rain fall, or will cure the boils, or something.

So there's this way in which there's a transmission process in which a high tradition religion is then made adapted by a peasantry for their own purposes, interests, and religious concerns, and my argument was—and I realized this, that I hadn't done justice to it in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*—was that, just as the relationship between doctrinal Catholicism and folk Catholicism is one thing, there, it's the same process of, let's say, doctrinal Marxism and Communism, and folk communism, and doctrinal, if you like, and elite nationalism, and folk nationalism.

And so that, the whole argument there was to show what happens when a set of beliefs moves from the kind of rarified atmosphere of the formal world of laws, doctrines, and urban elites, and the written word, and moves to a peasant population that lives in an oral tradition by custom, and so on. And so, I thought, it wasn't taken up by a lot of people, but I was very proud of those two articles because I thought it was a contribution to understanding peasant politics as going that, if you could understand the sociology of religion as it moved from one group to another, then you could understand peasant politics as well.

02-01:18:09

Holmes:

And you used some terms to help describe this: one of "slippage," I believe, of how that transmission goes, and then you also make the argument that this

type of pattern and structure is a bit of a shadow society, and that if we think that if we advance this far enough, that in many respects, there could be a shadow history that could eventually be written about a lot of the movements within the world's peasantry.

02-01:18:39

Scott:

It's a very nice observation. Yeah, so I spent a lot of time dealing particularly with the profanation side of it, with millenarian expectations, the idea, I don't know, this famous thing in the English Civil War when someone says, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"—the idea that there weren't aristocrats for Adam and Eve, so how did they come into being? They're not natural, and there was, in a sense, an idea of what world was like before the Norman yoke, before the Norman Invasion, and this idea of a world turned upside down. And Carnival: I used the example of Carnival, of the Hindu feast of Holi, where people can throw colored dyes on high-caste people. There's something called the Water Festival in places like Burma and Thailand, where you can take the district officer and throw him in the Mekong River, providing it's in these three or four days, and many of these things, of course, get out of hand.

So, they're not just sort of release valves for pressure; they're hard to contain, and so they're a contested space, and what I found interesting is that there were all these ideas, so, lower castes in Indian villages, even that their ancestors and for everything they could see, there was nothing to compare it with, and all was the caste system and they'd always been at the bottom lot, but they can do two things: one of them is they can imagine a world turned upside down in which the high caste, they're the high caste, and the high caste become the Untouchables, or, they can imagine a world in which the whole thing is negated, in which there are no castes.

And so, you don't have to have an ideology or go into the city, or seen another society to do those two little tricks of imagination, and almost all societies have them, and so, there's this counterpoint shadow society, and sometimes people act on these ideas, of course, as in, the coming of the messiah; some bandit in Russia is seen as the true tsar who's come back to save his people. So these ideas are, I think—before the French Revolution, all peasant revolutions had a kind of religious motivation.

02-01:21:15

Holmes:

Picking up on that cultural aspect that we see in this "Little Tradition," you also start to highlight cultural aspects within these peasant communities where this cultural opposition can also take the forms of maybe folk tales, or myths, and jokes, things that often, from other analysis, kind of fly below the radar, but when looked at it through this lens, as you point out, these are steps of not just perhaps resistance, that you would later describe more in full, but it's also a type of political little tradition. Discuss how that—because as you start with

religion, did this path easily start moving to politics of thinking of these kind of forms as resistance, or did that take longer to—

02-01:22:13

Scott:

Yes, the idea that in folk culture you find an implicit critique of hierarchy. So, in a sense, I wouldn't have said it this way then, but the essence of a civilization is the assertion that certain ways of speaking, behaving, dressing, eating, and so on, are better than, higher than, more civilized than the rough, crude, backward ways of eating, speaking, dressing, and so on. And so, in a sense, the peasantry, in particular, is asked somehow to admire a set of standards that they cannot themselves achieve because they don't have the money for the dress, for the correct funeral, for the correct marriage ceremony. They haven't learned the sacred texts, and so on. And so there's a built-in resentment at this presumption of the superiority, and so, there's a level of critique in like Br'er Rabbit, like Till Eulenspiegel's "Merry Pranks" in the English tradition, the Mouse Deer in Southeast Asia. These are people who are always outwitting powerful creatures by their cunning, and tricks, and so on, and making fun of them and getting around them. And so, it seems to me there's a kind of subversive element to peasant culture that's always there, and that so, it's not as if they have to lift themselves by their bootstraps. There's already a kind of counterpoint of ideology and critique that's implicit in peasant culture.

By the way, people like Shakespeare understand this because there's Falstaff, who comes to the edge of the stage and, speaking directly in an aside to the audience, says, "What an asshole that guy is. How can he speak that way? He doesn't know what he's talking about," and that's the sort of Falstaff talking to the ordinary people making fun of the sort of people on stage who think they're so smart. In Javanese puppetry, there's a guy named Semar, who's just like Falstaff, has a broken sword. He's like a dwarf, and he's always speaking with the audience and making fun of these people. What's interesting is there is a kind of constant critique, and it comes in the form of jokes, as well.

02-01:25:03

Holmes:

Well, looking at this little tradition as well, particularly when we look—you know, the little tradition versus the great tradition, or in the sense, the culture of the peasantry versus that of the elite, so the state—and in this you begin to also challenge the readers to somewhat start rethinking the terms of lawlessness, of banditry, of also even the primitive, that's starting to have scholars rethink their analysis of these terms, not just looking from the great tradition and its written record, but of trying to read across the grain, to look at this little tradition. Was this taken up much within the literature? Were there a lot of other scholars who were trying to start challenging these discourses, or challenging at least the way that we're thinking about the peasantry during this time?

02-01:26:03

Scott:

There were scholars who were doing this, and I learned as much from them, and that is to say, it's not as if my own kind of work didn't depend on people who understood that there was something important in these folktales, and in the hidden transcript, if you like, that they understood that there was an implicit critique of hierarchy and status differences that you could see in the humor, in the jokes, in the Carnival, and then this was a kind of—it's putting it too strongly, but it was like a kind of class culture, that everybody knew was there, that was usually off stage in terms of the elite's not seeing it.

So the people who studied slavery, they understood this, the people who studied the kind of peasantry, and their folktales, and as you know, there was all of these—Europe had this period in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century when everybody wanted to discover the folk genius of their nation before Catholicism and/or Protestantism, and went back—the Grimm brothers, and Hans Christian Andersen—to try to get all of the folktales, and so there were a bunch of folklorists who were thinking of all of this not just in curating the oral literature, but saw its class aspects.

02-01:28:01

Holmes:

Well these articles, of course, seemed to form the basis for your next book which came out in 1985: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*, but they also, these articles also came out right at the cusp—as you were saying before, you were about ready to do two years of field work in Malaysia. Talk a little bit about that field work, because this work, it starts to seem in some respects of you taking that step further towards anthropology.

02-01:28:37

Scott:

Absolutely. So, I, when I decided I wanted to study peasants, and I'm going to devote my time to that, then I decided I got to spend a couple of years in a Malay village. That's why I tried to negotiate this deal with Yale to give me two years off so I can do that, and what's interesting: I actually pride myself in this respect, that there were any number of people—when I told a colleague of mine at Wisconsin that I wanted to spend two years in a small, Malay village, I think the word he used was, "Scott, you're a knucklehead. This is a career-ending move. Nobody's going to care about a village with seventy or a hundred households in some woebegone, third-world country. You're going to ruin your career. This is really dumb." And, I knew I wanted to do it, and I knew I was going to do it, but I worried that he might be right, that I was ruining my career.

And so I went and did it anyway, and one of the great pleasures of my life is that it turned out fine, and not only did it not ruin my career, but it probably helped my career, and it was odd. At that point, I was—how old was I—forty-five, something like that at that point, and most anthropologists start their career a lot younger, and so, the political scientists were rather amazed that I should live in a village for two years, at my age with three children, and so on, and I don't know if you've ever done anything like this, but your life is not

your own. You are at work from the time you open your eyes in the morning till when you close them at night, and I've never worked so hard, partly because you're in a different language. Everything is completely new to you. It's all coming at you like a bullet train, and I used to, at night, no matter how I finished, no matter how tired I was, I had to read some novel for twenty minutes, even if with a flashlight under my mosquito netting, in order to have the novel take me away from the village, because it was so completely preoccupying.

And so, I think I learned more in that year, in the two years, than I've ever. I learned more, faster, in a completely unfamiliar situation, and it was painful in certain ways, but it was wonderful and my children will tell you that, although they hated it at the time, that it was the most important thing and most important year of their young lives. Two of them are doctors, and the other a pediatric nurse, and I think it's because of all the stuff they saw in the village, and they all lost a year of school, but it was tough and elevating and formative for all five of us.

02-01:32:00

Holmes:

I wanted to ask—we were just talking about you working on these articles about the little tradition, and really starting to play with the pieces that we would see really materialize in *Weapons of the Weak*—when you're there—

02-01:32:16

Scott:

I didn't see it that way, by the way.

02-01:32:17

Holmes:

Oh, that's interesting.

02-01:32:20

Scott:

It's a connection you see but I didn't see.

02-01:32:22

Holmes:

Because well, what I was going to ask is that, here you're playing with these ideas about the little tradition, and then you actually go and you do two years of field work. Did you see these aspects that you were writing about actually starting to play out?

02-01:32:37

Scott:

No, actually, I thought of it as a completely different project in which I wanted to understand class relations, in a Malay village at a time when the combine harvesters were coming in, and so on. I knew I wanted to spend two years in a village, and it happened that this village was undergoing mechanization in an interesting way that sort of looked like mid or 1830 work in English on mechanical threshing and how it changed class relations. And so, I don't think I ended up, as you see, with a kind of elite discourse and a commoner's discourse, and then a discourse when they both infect one another when these people are in one another's presence.

I did not think of this at the time as great tradition and a little tradition. I saw it as an effort to understand class relations in the countryside. However, I recognize the parallel that you want to make, that it's sort of this dichotomy between an elite tradition and a peasant tradition, or in this case, an upper-class village tradition, if you like, or wealthy villages versus not wealthy villages. The great tradition, of course, would have been the ulema and the imam and the political elites in Kuala Lumpur. So these were all peasants, and it was about class relations among the peasants of people who owned a fair amount of land and people who didn't have anything, but they were all backward primitives as far as the people in the cities were concerned.

02-01:34:37

Holmes:

In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, one of your goals there was to try to get at the, I guess, the root of revolt, or rebellion, and trying to understand it, the view from the peasants, and their own kind of rhythms and customs. Here, you start to, again, not shrug off the discourse of revolt or rebellion, and actually start looking at resistance, but it's not the resistance that, if I'm correct, that the majority of scholars would have actually been recognized as resistance.

02-01:35:15

Scott:

Correct.

02-01:35:15

Holmes:

How did these ideas begin to take form, not just during your field work, but also afterwards?

02-01:35:23

Scott:

So, you could say that I went looking for class struggle, and there was not much going on. That is, there was this subterranean struggle of the resentment, anger, kind of slander, sabotage, and so on. And so, I found, if you like, a tamped down—not finding a revolution, which I would have been happy to find, what I found were forms of resistance to mechanization insofar as poor peasants had a way of expressing this by words and deeds, and so on. So, I saw, if you like, a kind of class struggle with deep constraints about what could be done, so were no petitions, no marches, no riots, and so, but I found a kind of resistance that was not theorized but practiced and understood, and a vocabulary, and then having found that, I guess the reason why the book worked, to be straightforward about it, is that this was not so interesting to so many people because they didn't give a shit about this Malay village, or that Malay village, or Ethiopian village, or a Tanzanian village; that what I saw was that, most of the world is not in revolution most of the time, there are class tensions, and that peasants don't have parties and guns and the direct techniques the elites employ to get around problems of taxation. Instead, they deal with oppression and dispossession by devising a whole series of other ways in order to minimize the losses that they face.

So back to *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, except these are subterranean disguised, and so things like desertion, sabotage, squatting on land, I realized that, for most of history, most of the time, those people who don't have the luxury of open organization, open revolt, and so on, have to express these class antagonisms and class struggles in ways that don't open them to the worst kinds of harm and oppression, or death, for that matter. And so, I was on to desertion in the Civil War, and pilfering from stores in a famine, and so on, so, I then found that literature that showed how this worked in other settings rather than Malaysia. And so, I think the only reason why it was an interesting book for many people was because it said, "Look, you can find this throughout history in lots and lots of different situations, and this is the form that most class struggle takes through most of history, and we political scientists are a pain in the ass because we are focusing on, for the most part, formal Western democracies in which open organization and petitioning is possible, and that's just not true for most of people through most of history. So if you want to understand class struggle, that's not rebellion and revolution, then, this is it."

02-01:39:37

Holmes:

That was so nicely put, I almost forgot my second question. I wanted to ask, as you were thinking through this project and your ideas were developing, who were some of your intellectual influences that helped you along that way, during this project?

02-01:40:01

Scott:

So, what I did: One of the classes I taught early at Yale was a course on the experience of powerlessness and dependency. We read about slavery. We read about serfdom. We read about prisons and the Gulag. What else did we read? And we read about women, and so, I then taught a class in which I tried to sort of understand different forms of powerlessness and dependency, and the effects they had, and I learned a lot from this class because I did it without a lot of forethought, and so things just happened. So for example, I got this idea of asking the students—even before I distributed the syllabus, I got them all in the class and said, "It's about experience of powerlessness and dependency, and if you want to be in this class, I want you to write for twenty-five minutes about the most striking experience of powerlessness or dependency that you've ever had, and how it developed, how it made you feel, how it was resolved or not resolved, and, you can do this anonymously if you like." And so, guess what people wrote about. You want to guess?

02-01:41:59

Holmes:

[laughs] I'll let you tell me.

02-01:42:02

Scott:

Okay. So, many of them wrote about unrequited love. These were Yale undergraduates, so they haven't been oppressed, most of them, very deeply, and that is to say, to be in love with someone and not have them care whether you live or die, is to be really powerless, and you can only blame yourself

because you're the person who fell in love, after all, and what they understood, which I thought was extremely perceptive, is that you become inauthentic in the sense that you try to be that person that you think that person you love will love back. You try to sort of meet their expectations. You try it, and you become more and more false in some way in an effort to sort of please them and be the person you think they want you to be, and it generally fails. And so they understood, and that, of course, is the way in which people deal around a powerful person, a king, or people around Trump, and so on, in which you're trying to read the tea leaves and figure out what they want from you.

And so, it was a good way to start, and a lot of women, of course, wrote about rape or near-rape experiences, and I once, at a class—I think I only did it once, maybe twice—we then collected all of these things, and all read them, and the next class was about these essays and what we'd learned, and once, I said, "How many people didn't write about something that was even more painful just because it was too painful to write about it?" and maybe six people raised their hands, and five of them were women, and I suspect that what they didn't write about has to have been, my guess is, some kind of abuse. And so, I think, we were up to at least 40 percent of the women, or 50 percent of the women who had some experience in the course of growing up. So it was interesting.

Anyway, that class, because I read all the literature on slavery, serfdom, blah, blah, blah, it was like an education for me, and that literature comes from everywhere. It comes from oral histories: the Maria Carolina de Jesus that I mentioned to you earlier. It comes from the sort of great prison literature that there's a lot of. And so, I don't do it as much as I should. Rivers is a good example of doing that too, in which I feel my way into a theme or a topic by teaching it without knowing a hell of a lot about it, and use the teaching as a way of educating me, and I find that those classes work better. That is, I don't know if you find this, but I find that teaching a class in which I am enthusiastic but I haven't figured everything out, or I haven't figured much out, that enthusiasm and the space that it gives students makes it a better class than a class that I choose because I know all this shit, and I can just go in there and lecture and babble, and I think those classes are probably not as successful for the students as the ones in which I don't have the answers, and I'm sort of groveling, or that's not groveling, but groping myself for the answers.

02-01:46:00

Holmes:

In this work, you challenge [Antonio] Gramsci's theories on hegemony, consciousness, domination, highlighting the need to, again, just as we did in rethinking what it is to be primitive, or rethinking the peasant, in rethinking what hegemony actually means, and how domination is perhaps not as neat as perhaps Gramsci or others thought. Talk a little bit about that. When did that challenge, or at least that idea of challenging Gramsci arose in the work?

02-01:46:41

Scott:

So, I owe Gramsci an apology, posthumously, because I got him wrong, in a way. That is to say: So I was mesmerized by his idea of hegemony in which lower classes were, in a sense, dominated by the super-structural institutions of the newspaper, the church, and so on. So, Gramsci's problem was, once you have a democracy, and civil rights, and the rule of law, and votes, and so on, why don't the poor people just take over because they're more numerous, and so on, and, his answer is that, they're being brainwashed in important ways by all these institutions of ideological control, and so on. And so, for him, hegemony only applies to a situation where you have a quasi-functioning democracy, and if you don't have that, he calls that just domination, not hegemony.

So hegemony is an effort to understand how it is in a democracy that the ruling class still is the ruling class and hasn't all been strung up, or driven out, or replaced. And so, I think Gramsci would call my situation in Malaysia that I was examining "domination," because the electoral system didn't really work; the UMNO ruling party controlled everything, and so on. There were a few forms of public, political organization and so on that were allowed, but they never were allowed to trouble the ruling class. And so I think if Gramsci had looked at that, he would have said, "This is domination, not hegemony." It doesn't mean that my observations were wrong about the form that opposition took, but for Gramsci, you only get hegemony in a democracy. And so, his problem is how you have democracy and not lower-class rule, and so, I think what I had to say was right, but I took the word "hegemony" and applied it to a situation in which Gramsci would not have. Now Gramsci, it's a hard text, I don't know if you've read. It's written in a kind of elusive way because he's in prison, and so on.

02-01:49:38

Holmes:

Mm-hmm. Your point against Gramsci though is also focused on false consciousness, right?

02-01:49:47

Scott:

Correct.

02-01:49:48

Holmes:

And the need to actually rethink that, that, if it's fair to say, you were highlighting that these everyday forms of resistance by the peasants shows that no, they haven't acquiescent to domination, that there is not a form of false consciousness happening.

02-01:50:10

Scott:

Right, or that you can't—actually the claim, when I was doing it correctly, which I didn't always do, but the claim was that: you may not take evidence of people publicly obeying the wishes of the elites and their hymns of praise for elites, et cetera, et cetera. You may not take this as evidence for false consciousness. You have to show that when they're just talking to other people

at the bottom of the heap, their discourse isn't different, because we know in most cases it is different, and that they're not conforming to the hopeful imaginary of elite expectations. So, that is, it seemed to me that the world of public performance of politics was one designed in which there are all this performance of subordination, agreement, consent, and so on, and I'm saying, you have to look behind this, and you can only prove false consciousness if you can show me that the backstage is also filled with the same false consciousness evidence. You can't take it seriously as a public performance, because that's part of how people get through the day: say, "Yes, massa, whatever you say, boss," and then, "Fuck you," behind his back.

02-01:51:38

Holmes:

Exactly. Well, talk a little bit about the reception of this book. In the foreword, you discuss and acknowledge many of the early colleagues who gave early reviews, even giving thanks to Sam Popkin, which you had to put in parentheses, where everyone said, "Yeah, that's right." [laughs] Discuss the early reception to this work, both before publication and then, of course, after.

02-01:52:18

Scott:

It was really well received. So first of all, it had going for it, I think, a political scientist who actually did ethnographic field work in a serious way, just very rare in those days, and so, in a sense, anthropologists thought that a political scientist had paid them, paid his respects in a serious way by doing field work and reading the anthropological literature, and then, it was interesting for larger questions of hegemony the political scientists were thinking at the time. So it somehow linked up field work with kind of larger issues of social control, false consciousness, and so on, and as a result of that, I think, it got some quite wonderful reviews, in part for its readability, I think, and as you know, I started that out with Razak and Haji "Broom," and so on. That started it out in a way that was kind of accessible, as well, and I think the other thing that that book—first of all, there are some ways, Anna Tsing, but then she is an anthropologist, would say it's my best book. Certainly more blood, sweat, and tears went into it than any other book that I wrote in terms of the field work and so on, but it was also, I got a lot of respect as a Southeast Asianist. That is to say, *Moral Economy of the Peasant* was essentially about Burma and Vietnam, and here was Malay-based field work, so I'd kind of dealt with three different countries with different kinds of sources of information, learned my Malay, and so on and so, I began to be taken seriously by people like Clifford Geertz and Ben Anderson. And so I think only after *Weapons of the Weak* came out did they treat me like a colleague, rather than a little boy trying to do some work on Southeast Asia.

And so, I think that was, and I remember, I was at the institute in Princeton shortly after that book came out, *Weapons of the Weak*, and Geertz was there, and as the permanent member at Princeton, and I remember he read my book and was stopped—it was on like a stairway—and said, "Oh, I just finished your book; was great," and what he said—I didn't think of it at the time—he

said, "You know, your work is more coherent than mine." I'm not sure that's the word he used, but he meant that it was thematically more cohesive, then you could see *Moral Economy of the Peasant* and *Weapons of the Weak* as being part of the same kind of thematics in a way, and he would flit from thing to thing to thing to thing, and I realized only much later that he wouldn't have said that to me if he wasn't putting me on a kind of comparable plane. Why would he even bother, because, why would he be comparing? At that point, Geertz was master of the universe, and I worshiped his work, so, I only realized later that he must have really thought of me as a real colleague at the same level, and it was because of that book, I think, and it was because I was doing my field work.

02-01:56:31
Holmes:

Well, *Weapons of the Weak* then led, five years later, to another book which was—in many respects, some expected an extension of *Weapons of the Weak*, and some, such as Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan], has called the *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, almost like it's an extension, on one hand, but it's also a companion, that they go together, continuing this kind of exploration of resistance, or as I think you say in the foreword to *Hidden Transcripts*, "the war of words," in many respects. Discuss how this book developed, that, again, exploring a topic that it seems, once again, you didn't have the final word on yet that you wanted to say.

02-01:57:27
Scott:

Well, as I said, I was doing these classes that had—we read prison literature, and literature on serfdom and slavery, and I think that what happened was that that, the triangulation that is the basis of *Weapons of the Weak*, which it dawned on me that, oh, when I talk to the elites, I hear a certain song; when I talk to non-elites who are many ways antagonistic with them, I hear a different song; and when they're together, I hear another song altogether, and isn't this interesting that there are these separate transcripts. In a sense, *Weapons of the Weak* was to work out the difference between these different—I don't know why I called them "transcripts"; it was the only word I could come up with then—is that these three different—you learn a lot by seeing the difference in terms of, who's speaking to whom and the class situation of that speaking.

It's pretty simple, straightforward stuff, and so, in a sense, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* was an effort to take the core argument of *Weapons of the Weak* and say, "Hey, you can do this in lots of different situations." And then, I had to think about Carnival. I had to think about jokes. So it was an effort, and that was the first book that actually made it way out of political science, and still does; didn't, never sold as much as *Seeing Like a State*. So there, people completely astounded me. You know the so-called Q manuscripts which are the Dead Sea Scrolls that are different variants of the New Testament Gospels? And they're very, very different, and so, there are people who think that the hidden transcripts is the way to understand these different sort of variants of the Gospels—so I went to the Society for the Study of

Religion, and National Conference on Biblical Studies by scholars talking about this, and I don't know nothing about all of this stuff, and for people in English would teach it as well, because it's got a lot of literary references to George Eliot, and so on. And so, what was really interesting to me is that, it didn't happen right away, but that made its way outside of the social sciences, and my other stuff had never breached the wall of the social sciences. By the way, should we check the oven, you think?

02-02:00:35

Holmes:

Yeah, let's go ahead, we can take a quick break and do that.

02-02:00:38

Scott:

At that point, I don't know.

02-02:00:45

Holmes:

Yeah, yeah, we'll go ahead.

02-02:00:47

Scott:

All I have to take a look at— [break in audio]

02-02:00:50

Holmes:

All right, Jim, we're back, and I wanted to ask, because one of the aims here was again taking a further step forward from *Weapons of the Weak*, by encouraging readers to really dig in and analyze discourses, comparatively; that you were also trying to, in a sense, give scholars and readers a way to better interpret, say gossip, folktales, songs, not just different ways to think of them, but as you were just talking about the Dead Sea Scrolls, of maybe ways that we can get a better understanding and other ways of analysis.

02-02:01:36

Scott:

Yeah. The literary scholars have this thing of intertextuality, in which you see each version of a poem as it's changed, as the person is writing it extracts words and includes new words, reformulates the prose, the rhyme, and so on, and you get this sense for the process by which something is done, and in the same way, it seems to me that you can get in a culture, let's say the way the myth is told, by a person of a certain standing and region and status, and how the same tale is told by somebody else of a different status and class and standing and region, and it's that triangulation that you get so that, something like a Carnival, the Catholic Carnival, is like a very complicated black mass of official Catholic values, and by seeing all the different ways in which the profanation or bending or making ludicrous versions of Catholic official performance, you understand a lot about the society and why they should want to tell the story somewhat differently than somebody else.

So it's that triangulation within a society that is useful, I think, and these all coincide with places in the world, so that to take the discourse at the Faculty Club of Economics of the University of Chicago as opposed to a lower-class pub several blocks away, and they're both talking about what happened in, oh, the economy today, you get wildly different versions. And so, it's that

triangulation; so Carnival is a particular space temporally in the year that's different from the space, let's say, of the Catholic fathers getting together to decide church rules and so on, that's all.

02-02:04:24

Holmes:

You came up with the term "infrapolitics" to discuss this interaction, this triangulation in many ways, and this term has now been used across disciplines—

02-02:04:38

Scott:

Really?

02-02:04:39

Holmes:

—in a variety of ways. Maybe discuss a bit, how did you come up with the term?

02-02:04:50

Scott:

I think, I know, actually, that I apologized for introducing a new term, because, and when I do introduce it, I don't like neologisms and so on. Political science and the social sciences are full of kind of new, invented, artificial words, and so, I was a little self-conscious about inventing that. I wanted a term, as you said earlier, things below the radar, so I wanted to have a general term for political action that does not speak its own name, and that tries to pass not as politics or direct confrontation and so on, and so I wanted for people to realize that, and this is for the benefit of political scientists because for political scientists, they don't pay attention to a movement unless it has an official name, a president, a vice president, secretary, minutes, a banner, public sort of events that they carry on. That's politics. That's the politics in the formal sector that actually is very useful to study in certain political systems because that, because people, they're the costs of the—what do they call them—the opportunity costs of organizing, transaction costs of organizing are not very high in these societies.

But I wanted to say, "Hey, all I was doing is actually what Hobsbawm does in *Primitive Rebels*, in another sense." It dawned on me the other day, is that I simply want to say, "Hey, look at all this activity. You assholes don't think this is politics, but I promise you, it's politics and it's most of politics in many societies for most of history, so you're welcome to not pay attention to it," and I had an article in the *Comparative Studies in Society and History* in which I take on Tilly, who is a good friend, and I said, "Well, he may have this idea about what constitutes a social movement, and I'm happy to give him that definition, but if he's not looking at this other stuff, all I want to say is, you're missing a lot of what is actually politics." And so, the infrapolitics was to say it's outside of the visible light spectrum for most of the formal social sciences, and they ignore it at their peril, and actually, if I had to think, if I'd said anything important, I would be up there. I think it not heeded enough by political scientists.

02-02:07:45

Holmes:

When we look at this term, and particularly your aim, you're again making another challenge again at false consciousness, and saying that the peasantry, and many of these, the peasant societies around the world, should not just be judged, again by Western standards of what happens in the public light, but that we have to consider that kind of backstage, hidden transcripts, that under-the-radar type of action that's politics. Did this further your argument in the field of rethinking false consciousness, rethinking Gramsci's use of domination?

02-02:08:37

Scott:

Yeah, I think it did by, and I'm not sure Gramsci would have—be interesting what Gramsci would have thought, if he read it, but I think it, the question, a good way to think it through, I think, that's the way I thought it through, is to take something like poaching, and so, you can just see poaching as theft: A takes rabbit from Aristocrat B's sort of forest, or firewood, or something like that. It's an individual act. It's not political; it's theft. The person who takes the rabbit gets to have rabbit stew, which is nice, and why should you possibly think this is politics? And my argument is, if you can show, as you can for poaching, for two centuries in England, that you can almost never get a local person to testify against another local person for poaching—they know that they cannot get witnesses to help them out. They all hate the gamekeeper, and we know from other ditties and songs and stories that poachers were celebrated, and that most peasants didn't believe that unimproved land could be claimed as private property, that the rabbits were there were God's, if you like. God put them there and anybody could take them, just the way fish and—so if you hadn't improved the land, if you hadn't transformed the landscape, then all the things that were there in the natural world were common property.

And so, if I can show you that the act of poaching falls into this larger structure of collective beliefs about property and what is common property and what the aristocrats can claim, and that people refuse to give evidence, or maybe they have other, special, nice words for poaching, as like reappropriation; if I can show you that this act is enclosed in a body of ideology, even though it's a rather quiet one, then, I think, we should call it resistance, but I have to show you that. I just can't say "poaching is resistance" without providing this, the idea that it's a normative framework about property, and that people are, at least collaborating by not giving witness against one another, and if you can show they're encouraging one another and cooperating to poach, that's even stronger; that's even better. So the—what is it, when Gerrard Winstanley said something—was quite wonderful—said, "They string up the man who steals a goose from the commons, but they don't string up the man who steals the commons from underneath the goose," [laughter] and that's a real movement. That's the diggers or the levelers in the English Civil War.

02-02:12:14

Holmes:

You've previously said that E. P. Thompson's history on the English working class was very influential for your thinking. Did that play a role in helping you think through your various explorations of resistance?

02-02:12:36

Scott:

Yeah, everything I've read by E. P. Thompson turned out to be enormously productive and helpful, and I can remember the chair I sat in when I was reading *The Making of the English Working Class*. As you know, it's a big book, takes a while to finish, and I can remember just thinking the other day about the chapter on Methodism as well—it's so subtle and clever—and the idea that their working class activity leads to class consciousness, not class consciousness leads to working class activity—so he turns the world on its head, and I think *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, his thing on time and discipline, his stuff on commons—there's no one who's had a greater influence on me than E. P. Thompson. If there's a book that's had more, the single book that's had most influence on me is probably *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi, I think, if I had to just choose one. And so, yeah, E. P. Thompson, somehow, he had a—I'll tell you one more; off screen, I'll tell you: I met E. P. Thompson.

02-02:14:14

Holmes:

Oh wow.

02-02:14:16

Scott:

He was not well at the time, and it was nice. It was in England maybe two or three years before he died.

02-02:14:32

Holmes:

Another scholar that you've often cited as an influence was, of course, Foucault, but I know you've also said before that you lamented that Foucault never got around to actually writing on resistance, that you were always awaiting a good book on resistance from Foucault, and hoping to learn from that.

02-02:14:55

Scott:

And he said he was going to do it, just like [Pierre] Bourdieu, who also promised stuff on resistance, but they were so good at understanding false consciousness if you like, and its mechanisms and how it operated, that they never got around to resistance. I haven't read all of Foucault, actually. *The Discipline and Punish* is probably extremely important for me, and the other guy who is important for me in the context of discipline and punish that I've never made much of, is Norbert Elias's book called *The History of Manners*, and it's about the civilizing process. It's kind of a series of two or three books, and the kind of control, how manners, things like how table manners became developed, and *courtoisie* as in courtesy, and the kind of forms of interaction between people, and his argument, which is very interesting with Foucault, that, in a sense, what happens is that violence is removed from the public sphere, like Foucault's argument, and that it then is made quasi-scientific,

rational, and done behind walls and monopolized by the state, the before, and it's the same argument about people didn't have manners, they ate with their hands, and *courtoisie* was this bodily control in close spaces where people were packed in, and [phone rings] he has this whole argument—we're fine. I already put some stuff over there.

02-02:17:04

Holmes:

I wanted to ask about your contributions and reception to *Hidden Transcripts*. You discussed the reception of your early work, and also the use of infrapolitics. What do you make of its use, well, over what is now, gosh, over twenty years?

02-02:17:31

Scott:

As I said, you write something and you're pleased when somebody uses it, even if they don't get it right somehow. As Mae West said, "Just spell my name right," no such thing as bad publicity. And so, I was completely happy, as I said, that *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* made it sort of outside the social science academy into other fields of literature and religion, for that matter, and got some criticism, but as I said before, I move on. It's like you've raised a teenager and they've finished high school and they're going off to college, and you see them off the door, and that's like a book. You've worked closely with them, developed them, done everything you can to make them as good as you can, and then, you're on your own. So once the book is published, I've washed my hands of you. You're on your own. You're going to make your own way in the world. People are going to misunderstand you or not understand you right, but don't ask me to go back and revise you. I did what I could to raise you into a tolerable, good-looking adult, and if you fall down, it's too late anyway, oh well. [laughter] It's as if I lose interest in my children once they're grown and adults and out on their own.

02-02:19:52

Holmes:

You had proposed in your articles that we spoke about in regard to the little tradition, in 1977 you proposed the idea of, if we take these steps in analysis, that we could actually provide a shadow history of social movements throughout the Third World, a better understanding of the peasantry. How would you gauge the impact of those concepts, or at least that aim over the last thirty years?

02-02:20:22

Scott:

I don't think it's had any effect. [laughter] I don't think people picked that up and used it, and maybe, to a certain extent, I was writing—it's a question of the topic *du jour* and what people are concentrating on, and I'm conscious of this actually, that I was concentrating, for a lot of my career, on societies that, for certainly throughout the resistance stuff, that are seen as antiquated, superseded by modern society, far more integrated now into urban networks, and so on. So, I think there are a lot of people that think I was writing about a world that is now, if not disappeared, only in scattered places here and there.

02-02:21:31

Holmes:

Do you think there's a better attention within say, a variety of disciplines to actually looking at the subaltern more, and a better understanding and analysis of those communities than there were, say, back thirty years ago?

02-02:21:57

Scott:

No. What's interesting, of course, is that the subaltern, it's a way of avoiding class, by using subaltern. That is, the term "subaltern" is a way of conducting class analysis with a slightly different vocabulary, and I don't think that most people today think that class analysis is relevant to too much of anything. Maybe every once in a while when the teachers of West Virginia get up on their hind legs and go to Charleston and make trouble, and the Service Employees International Union has a little success here or there, we get a little bit of this, and I expect we'll get a lot more of it with the diversion of income, and certainly, people like Bernie Sanders picked up on class analysis, but in the academy, I think that people may concentrate on differences of wealth. This guy, Jacob Hacker, who I admire a lot actually, he does a kind of class analysis, but by and large, I think in the academy, there're not many people who are attentive to class issues, when in fact, you could argue, it's more relevant than it's ever been. So the answer is: Was Scott's call to the analysis of subalterns heeded and responded to? The answer's no. [laughter]

02-02:23:53

Holmes:

Well Jim, I want to I think this is a good place to stop and we'll pick this up again tomorrow.

02-02:23:58

Scott:

Okay, good.

02-02:23:58

Holmes:

Thanks.

Interview 3: September 23, 2018

03-00:00:05

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 23, 2018, and I have the privilege of sitting down again for our third session with James C. Scott for his oral history, as part of the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. Jim, thanks for sitting down with me again, and thank you for putting me up these past few nights.

03-00:00:30

Scott:

Happy to do so.

03-00:00:33

Holmes:

Well, we left off last time talking about your works on resistance, and I wanted to follow up today with discussions of your remaining works in this session, and starting with what seems to be a return in your scholarship to a refocus on the state. In 1998, you published *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, and by all accounts, this was another groundbreaking work in a variety of fields. In some respects, we see almost a combination of your works on resistance and your works on the state kind of merge in this, but I wanted to have you maybe start off discussing the genesis of this work and how it developed for you.

03-00:01:39

Scott:

This is where the Agrarian Studies program and my scholarship come together. That is to say, we [the Program] began in 1991, and we were teaching about peasants and land tenure, and as you will remember, in those days, the buzzword was development, and the development of the countryside, and land reform. So, a great many of our early colloquia and our postdocs in the Agrarian Studies program were people who were interested in development studies, broadly considered.

And so, I regard *Seeing Like a State* as the book that developed as a result of the seminar I took by listening to the Agrarian Studies colloquium every week for the better part of a decade, and we had lots of people talking about failed development schemes, and why they had failed in this place or the other place, and the idea of development. I began to develop in my own mind a sense for the systematic ways in which development programs failed. The big concept in *Seeing Like a State* is legibility, and I began to reflect on how states tried to make their population, their land ownership pattern, and so on, legible. And I then did a certain amount of peripheral reading around this effort to codify how—what was called then "cameral science," in which the princes of Europe and kings tried to formalize and make systematic their revenue, which meant making systematic their population rolls, the taxes, the cadastral surveys, the land taxes, and so on. This began with a kind of history of taxation and so-called cameral science, cameral meaning in the offices of the prince, if you like. And so, *Seeing Like a State* is an effect of the Agrarian Studies Program,

and of listening week after week after week, and actually in the courses reading about the failure of different forms of economic development.

03-00:04:26

Holmes:

Now, you have said earlier that initially, you set out to explore in this book how or why government officials are viewed so often as enemies by the peasantry, or by the poor and mobile communities. What was really the driving force behind you shifting your analysis a little bit in this book?

03-00:05:00

Scott:

I'd studied a lot of peasant revolts, as you can imagine, in my previous work, and one of the things that struck me is that it was very common, both in Late Medieval Europe and in the Third World, for peasant insurgencies and peasant rebellions to first attack the government offices and the land record offices and burn all the paper. And so, it seemed to me that the peasants understood from the very beginning that they were governed by a regime of paper and records and lists, and cadastral surveys, and they identified this paper with taxation and oppression. Obviously, there're people behind this, but the peasantry often thought that burning down the records office would be the first step in eliminating the kinds of structures that governed them. They also understood—I think this is almost universally true—that if surveyors come to the countryside to actually demarcate farmland and ownership, or count people or conduct a census of some kind, the peasantry has always understood this as a prelude to conscription, or taxes, or another imposition. So, they understand that being counted, enumerated, listed, and so on is a state project that is not going to end well for them. And so, this is the project of the state in a sense. It happens in colonialism. It's like a king taking an inventory of his inheritance, of all the things that they own, and how much can be squeezed from it year by year.

03-00:07:07

Holmes:

Part of your argument in this is a critique of high modernist ideology, and not taking, in a sense, local forms of knowledge and understanding and context into consideration when crafting some of these policies. There were others who were also critiquing the state at this time. What was it about high modernism that you really wanted to focus on?

03-00:07:36

Scott:

Actually, it's hard for me to reconstruct how this all got put together, because as you know, the book is, essentially—after a couple of introductory chapters of the overall argument, I then have a series of chapters that are actually case studies, one of them being the comparison between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, another between Brasília and São Paulo and Rio as urban landscapes, and then Tanzanian and Russian collectivization, and villagization in Tanzania. And so, the idea of high modernism, that has traveled further than I expected it to travel, came to me, actually, by reading Lenin, carefully, which I had not done before, and also looking at Le Corbusier, and the kind of

modernists who built Brasília, because it was clear to me that they had an idea of a kind of total standardization and simplification.

The Bauhaus School, for all their leftist leanings, had the same kind of thing. The idea was that human beings needed a certain amount of air, they needed a certain amount of running water, and they needed a certain amount of sunlight; they needed a certain amount of outside space where they could exercise; they needed a kitchen of a certain size. And so, the Bauhaus and the modernist architects and Lenin, they had the idea that there was a single, scientific, unitary solution to every social problem in the world, and that it was the same, regardless of culture, history, or place, or landscape, or climate. So, theirs was this idea of an abstract human being with certain needs that had to be met, and many of them felt they were progressive, left-wing Communists, for that matter, but they were building for an abstract person. Le Corbusier had this idea that he was designing for the world, that wherever the structures he designed—they could be plopped down in Beijing, Algiers, or São Paulo, and they would be just perfect no matter who you were.

And so, I put that together with the incredible sense of progress in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century of chemistry and manufacturing, hydroelectric power, and electricity—Lenin was mesmerized by electricity—the degree to which people thought that science and technocrats could solve all our problems. The best example of that is Lenin, in the sense that Lenin looked at German First World War mobilization and thought the Germans lasted much longer on the front than anyone thought they could, and it was by command control of the economy from the center; a kind of, if you like, nationalization of the economy by the war planners. And he thought that the Germans had all the answers, and that all you had to do was to replace the right-wing German Prussian officer corps by the Communist Party—everything was perfect about the ship; you just had to replace the people at the helm, and if you put Communists in charge, they'd steer it in the right direction. You didn't need politics, because there was a nonpolitical answer and they could impose it on the population.

03-00:11:47

Holmes:

You also mentioned in the book that high modernism ideology by itself is not always going to lead to trouble, but it's when it encounters, I think you named four factors, when these collide, trouble is inevitable. How did you come up with the four? What was the process of really identifying those four factors in your thinking?

03-00:12:15

Scott:

Well of course, I realized that a faith in progress is not necessarily a reactionary view or a progressive view. I forget who said this—Oscar Wilde perhaps—that "a map without Utopia on it is no use at all," that "every map needs a Utopia." And so, as you say, it's not as if the idea that there's a utopian world that we're striving for is, in and of itself, mistaken, because these ideals

of a better future and the progress of mankind—more freedom, more leisure, more goods as well, and a better society—these are kind of noble ideas. What's wrong is when you have a technocratic political elite who think they have the single, unitary solution that needs to be imposed. Normally in a democratic state—take TVA—they're unable to completely impose it and they have to make compromises. But if you have an autocracy, then you can just simply impose these solutions and have a bureaucratic technical elite that just tells people, "Get off the bus here. This is the design for society, and you have to fit into it." The result of this, even if you have an autocracy is it often doesn't succeed because of the resistance of the population.

And so, it seems to me the places where this has been the most disastrous have been places like Cambodia; Russia after the First World War; China after the Second World War, where you had a completely devastated society, its civilian structures destroyed or crippled, and a revolutionary elite that took over and was able then to impose itself without much opposition. And so there, no compromises had to be made. You had a utopian scheme that was simply applied across the board, and the results were the Khmer Rouge, collectivization in Russia starting in the 1930s, and the Great Leap Forward, and the cultural revolution in China. And they wouldn't have happened if you had a mobilized society that was able to resist it very successfully.

03-00:15:15

Holmes:

As discussed earlier, one of the terms that you use in this book that I know many other scholars in a variety of disciplines have also found very useful in reanalyzing state actions, is "legibility." This will be something that, as we'll discuss later in this session, also comes into play in your later works. Was this something that arose in your thinking during this project, or was this something that you had, even in your work in resistance, thought about, in regard state actions making a population legible?

03-00:16:03

Scott:

No. I wish I could tell you how the word popped into my head. There's a quote at the very beginning of *Seeing Like a State* that I only got much later actually. Someone sent it to me, and I thought, this is perfect, and this was someone writing to the French king in the seventeenth century saying, "Wouldn't it be nice for the king in his own chambers to have a map that would tell him where people lived, what the population was, how wealthy they were, where the Protestants were, where the Catholics were, so that he could, in a sense, take in his kingdom on paper at a glance made visible to him in documents, maps, and so on?" And so what's interesting: that's where the legibility comes in. Could he, in a sense, see his population without traveling to see them one by one? And in a sense, of course, we know that the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Treasury, the IRS, see this world through a series of documents and categories through which they organize, through their particular lens for particular purposes, that sort of larger population.

And so, I guess the word, there may have been a better word I could have chosen, but legibility is the one that popped into my mind, so that it means a way of reading, and a way of reading for things that are otherwise too complicated in their particularity to be taken in, so they have to be taken in as members of categories that are more abstract, such as those people below the poverty line, those who have middle incomes, for example, and so on.

03-00:18:19

Holmes:

A lot of critiques of the state focus on what is often referred to today as neoliberalism, a market-based kind of focus of state actions and policy. Yet, in *Seeing Like a State*, you highlight both capitalist as well as Communist states, and how this high modernism infused within these other four factors to cause this type of trouble. Discuss that a bit, of not taking an economic look, I guess, at the state, but of actually looking at states, in a variety of planes, and how that functioned.

03-00:19:08

Scott:

The general idea, I think, which I expressed somewhere in the book explicitly, is that the deeper the intervention you want to carry out in a society, the more information you need about that society. I have a kind of humorous example I sometimes think of: If you want to provide everyone who's lost their left foot with a kind of special device that will mimic the action of their left foot—slipped over an ankle that's been amputated, et cetera—you need to know all those people and what ages they are who've lost their left foot, all over society. So, you need, if you like, a lens that will separate out from all the world that still has its left foot from all those people in your society that are missing a left foot. And the intervention can be for good purposes or bad purposes; purposes that we like, purposes that we don't like. But if you want to make a discriminating, granular intervention in society, you need an appropriate level or depth of information, and that is the kind of essence of the legibility. I'm not sure I haven't lost the original question that you had. Refresh my memory.

03-00:20:46

Holmes:

Of both of analyzing both capitalist and Communist states.

03-00:20:51

Scott:

So, if you think of, let's say, McDonald's, they have the same problem of legibility. It's a span of control across a large number of units that you cannot surveil adequately every day, all day long, although surveillance cameras help us do this these days. So that in general, it's changed a little bit, but each McDonald's is laid out the same way: the freezers are in exactly the place that you can find, the fryers are in another place, the tomatoes and cheese and so on are in another place, so that each, these are modules, like little McDonald modules. The façade may be different and some may be brick and some may be wood and so on, but the organization of a McDonald's, a franchise, may be larger or smaller, but it's likely to be the same units in the same place.

And so, Caesar, when he established his camps when he was on the march, created this thing called a "castra," the camp, that was actually the same. So a messenger who came to Caesar's castra knew exactly where messages should be delivered, exactly where the food was going to be supplied, where the barracks were, where the military equipment was likely to be. So, every organization that needs to have a span of control over a large number of units will try, insofar as possible, to have those units be uniform because it allows them to exert control that's built into the architecture in some respect.

03-00:22:47

Holmes:

I wanted to ask, what are your thoughts on the book's reception and impact, over what is now twenty years?

03-00:22:56

Scott:

Well, I think it's, in terms of the number of people who teach it and cite it, it's probably the most well-known of anything I've written. The criticism I think largely comes in two directions. One of them is the idea that lots of high modernist schemes are successful, rather than failures, and so people have gone to some great lengths to show the conditions under which high modernist schemes actually might succeed and might be important. The other criticism made in a book recently by Jess Gilbert at University of Wisconsin, is what he calls "low modernism," and so when we had a panel discussion at the history meetings not too long ago. His claim is that the New Deal actually did consult with local farmers, and that the projects of TVA and the New Deal, particularly in the South, were calibrated to take into account the interest, desires, and so on, of people on the ground, and that they therefore were not as grandiose or as simple or as homogenous as I might have thought they were.

I see the same struggle in the New Deal, because I did have a chapter, by the way, that appeared in another book on the TVA, because *Seeing Like a State* got to be too big, and I had to take a chapter out. I wish I had kept the TVA chapter, and taken out the Rosa Luxemburg-Lenin chapter, because no one ever mentions that; it seems to have disappeared. But the TVA chapter, my understanding of the TVA, and I made an effort to really understand how it worked, was that the true high modernists did lose out. Rex Tugwell and [M.L.] Wilson, I guess, they are eventually pushed out and David Lilienthal takes over, and TVA gets to be essentially electricity and hydroelectric power project and dams. The true high modernists who want land reform, who want a complete restructuring of society, I don't know what happens to Wilson, but Tugwell is sent to Puerto Rico where he becomes governor of Puerto Rico, and he has essentially a colonial empire that he can push around as he likes.

And so it seems to me that what's interesting is that as Roosevelt's coalition in Congress gets weaker, and he needs the votes of Southern senators and congressmen, he has to make compromises with a very kind of ugly, racist elite in the South, and does. So, here's an example where the high modernists' plans were plans that probably would have gotten rid of some of Jim Crow,

would have been much more egalitarian, vis-à-vis the black population, and so on. It was defeated by, if you like, local power structures, and it still was on balance a rather progressive result, of course, but not as far as the high modernists would have otherwise taken it.

03-00:26:41

Holmes:

There were some interpretations or misreadings of the work, seeing you as favoring—or better put—the discussion as favoring a market liberalism, pointing to I think your reference to Friedrich Hayek. Can you discuss that a little bit? Because I know in other parts of the work, you really emphasize that this is not the aim of the book, that you're not advocating for that. Discuss that if you will.

03-00:27:21

Scott:

You're absolutely right about the way in which it's been misunderstood, and perhaps, if it's misunderstood, that's always partly the author's problem too, right? So I perhaps should have gone even more in the direction of making clear what I did feel at the time, and still feel. If someone, when I was in college and doing political economy and reading Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, and so on; if someone told me that I would have had a good word to say ever about Hayek, I would have thought they were crazy—and/or Ludwig von Mises, or Milton Friedman.

So, in the question of whether I was misunderstood, I will tell you that within a year, after the book was published, I got a telephone call from—I forget his first name. He's a rather well-known economist named [William A.] Niskanen, who was head of the Cato Institute at the time, and so help me God, he wanted me to come and address their annual convention. Cato is a libertarian, actually very sound on questions like abortion and gay marriage and so on, and against surveillance, but they're libertarian in terms of regulation and so on. I remember my partner was with me and I put my hand over the phone and said to her, "What have I done wrong that the Cato Institute is calling me and wants me to sort of talk at their conference." I, of course, refused to do so, because I disagreed with the Cato Institute in so many other ways, but it has been read in a libertarian way as a critique of the state, and I meant it to be a critique of large-scale capitalism as much as a critique of the state. So, was I misunderstood? Yes, and that's probably my fault for not making clear that large, industrial, private organizations have the same problems of control, legibility, and so on.

03-00:29:59

Holmes:

There was a forum on this book years after it was published, and in there, you were writing that it was during *Seeing Like a State*, or in the aftermath, that you started reading more anarchist literature, realizing that some of that literature actually would have been more useful than Hayek in making the same point, perhaps?

03-00:30:28

Scott:

Yes. Well, let me say a good word for Hayek, for a little section of Hayek, and that is, what Hayek did understand is that there're limits to bureaucratic control, and that if you're trying to police thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of transactions of barter and exchange and so on, you can't do this through imperative coordination from the top, something like a market. He makes, actually, I think, an interesting analogy of language, and the way in which language, if you think of it, it's not as if everyone has equal access to formation of the language. Schoolteachers have a certain influence, and grammarians and dictionaries and proper usage, but everybody who is a speaker and making speech acts contributes to the creation of slang as the language develops. And so, his idea that language is an interesting metaphor for a form of coordination and communication and control, and I found that to be an interesting analogy, and he wants to make that like the market.

The problem with the market, of course, is that the market doesn't count votes. The market counts money, and the more dollars you have, the more money you have, the greater your influence in the market. So what they miss and excuse and apologize for, that to me is unacceptable, is for the huge disparities in wealth, control, and power that we have even more today, that characterize the market, and market exchange. I've got nothing against market exchange providing everyone has the same number of dollars; it's their willingness to tolerate huge concentrations of monetary and economic power that can then, of course, as we see today, influence elections nationwide.

03-00:32:51

Holmes:

So was it during this book that you started to read and dive into anarchist literature, or was this something that held your interest beforehand?

03-00:33:04

Scott:

It goes back very deeply. So, one of my gurus is the person with whom I taught at Wisconsin on theories of peasant revolution, and he introduced me to a lot of the anarchist classics, which I read a little bit of when I was at Wisconsin, in my spare time. Never wrote anything about it, and I remember him saying something that stuck in my mind, which I've adopted as a slogan of my own—he should get credit for it every time—is that he said, "When the revolution becomes the state, it becomes my enemy, and I'm with the revolution so long as it's not the state yet."

And so I found myself, actually throughout my teaching career, saying things that, as they were coming out of my mouth, or afterwards, I said to myself, "That sounds like what an anarchist would say," and it happened a lot. It happened enough so that I thought, you know, you keep saying these anarchist things without sort of having done your homework, and so, I actually taught a course on anarchism, for two years, I think, for undergraduates, and it was wonderful because all the Yale undergraduate left wing was there. If you'd dropped a bomb on our class, you would have destroyed 90 percent of the undergraduate left wing, I think, in those couple of years. And so, I taught the

sort of beginnings of *Seeing Like a State*, and I taught the anarchist classics of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Saint-Simon, and so on. My effort was to give myself a kind of anarchist education so that, rather than just babbling things that sounded anarchist, I actually did my homework and kind of knew how it fit into a larger and deeper anarchist literature.

03-00:35:23

Holmes:

Well we see this interest and what you would call in a later book an "anarchist squint," we see this type of perspective taking shape in your next work, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Discuss how the genesis of this book and how you came upon this topic—this not what we see as resistance, or the operations of the state, but actually looking at people who are stateless, and stateless on purpose.

03-00:36:01

Scott:

Right. So, it's important to remember that I'm a Southeast Asianist. That's my kind of training. Those are the languages that I set out to learn. My first year abroad was essentially in Burma, and then two years in Malaysia. So my first book, or my first book that anybody recognized—well, my first book, the *Political Ideology in Malaysia*, and then *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, and *Weapons of the Weak*, they're all about Southeast Asia. So, I'm being a true-blue Southeast Asianist through those works. The next work, which is *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, and *Seeing Like a State*, aren't about Southeast Asia at all. There's a little section of *Seeing Like a State* that has a tiny little bit about Southeast Asia, but by and large, I kind of leave the plantation in terms of being a Southeast Asianist. I think you should stick to your knitting and should know your limitations, and I felt that I was in danger of getting too broad and grandiose, and I was actually interested in the relationship between Southeast Asian states and their peripheral peoples, their ethnic minorities in the hills.

And so, I started then to go back—I taught this course on anarchism; I'd written *Seeing Like a State*, so I was sensitized to anarchist issues, and I felt that they helped me understand the effort by hill groups and minorities in Southeast Asia historically put the state at a distance from themselves. And so, yes, it has a kind of anarchist spirit, and I think that it's not just that I went in with anarchist proclivities into that work, but I thought that I actually found a pattern of the evasion of state formation in the hills, areas that had not been controlled by states until very, very, very recently, and even in some places in Southeast Asia, not even today.

03-00:38:39

Holmes:

The area that you focus on, called Zomia, how did you get introduced to this area, and then, furthermore, how did the development intellectually of the processes of them fleeing the state, and that type of resistance, actually take form?

03-00:39:12

Scott:

At this point, I'm studying Burmese, and I'm returning to Southeast Asia, I'm going to Burma, occasionally; and I'm spending almost all of my time reading all of the ethnographies about non-state groups, all the anthropology, all the history of the mountain people and their relationship to the six or seven Southeast Asian states. So the core of my interest is this question that I circle around in *Seeing Like a State* as well, which is why the state has always been the enemy of people who move around, whether they're Berbers or Bedouins or Gypsies, or hill people, or wandering Jews, and so on. It's interesting to me that the state has always wanted to fix people in space.

And so that's the kind of core idea that I went into, my reading of all of the hill peoples in Southeast Asia. I think I've covered that literature fairly comprehensively with the idea that I was going to do field work, but this was pretty much a library book, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, and preliminary to hopefully doing a little bit of field work. But the core idea is why the state's the enemy of people who move around, and using that as a lens to understand the fact that all of the early states were rice-growing states in which you had a sedentary population that was growing rice in a concentrated way, in the alluvial valleys, and it's a kind of historical geography, as you know, in terms of the relationship between people at higher altitudes and people on the flood plains. I expanded that later, although I haven't written about it, to people who run away not to the mountains but to marshes, and swamps, and mangrove coasts as well. So there are lots of ways to run away. It's just that the modal way of running away in Southeast Asia is to run to the hills.

03-00:41:49

Holmes:

You use the term "shatter zone" as a type of niche for this area, a kind of refuge, if you will, from the process of state encroachment. One of the aspects that you point out is by understanding these more mobile communities, we can actually reanalyze that binary between highlands and lowlands, and more importantly, the terminology of primitive, barbarians. It's almost like, as I think you say, as strategic creation of a "barbarian frontier," in some respects. Discuss that a little bit, the aim there of trying to once again take what we thought about resistance, and in this case, what some think of someone's backwardness, if we're looking from the state's purview, and turning it on its head.

03-00:42:58

Scott:

So this is the idea of a counter-narrative in this respect, so if you ask the states, or you ask most lowland people in Southeast Asia about the hill people, they will talk about the hill people at their most sympathetic. Either they're just backward savages, but at a sympathetic level, they will say, "These are our living ancestors. That's what we were like before we discovered Buddhism, and rice cultivation and civilization." So, there is this idea that they are simply a more backward stage of what we became—very, very strong in Vietnam in which the language of some hill peoples is seen to be the crude

predecessor of the Vietnamese language, of Vietnamese culture, and so on. But it's true all over Southeast Asia.

So the idea is that these were the people, if you like, left behind, who were always there, always in the hills, and some of them came down to civilization and formed civilization, and some of them remain backward primitives in the hills. My argument is that most of this population—not all of it—but most of this population was not in the hills, and most of this population accumulated over a 2,000 year period in the hills as a result of running away from states, epidemics, diseases, conscription, and so on; mostly from the Chinese state, but also from the Burmese state, the Vietnamese state. They accumulated then in the hills and they came from different sort of areas over time, and this is the origin of the term "shatter zone." I'm a poacher; I'm a stealer of other people's good concepts, and so I came across "shatter zone" in Stuart Schwartz's work on Brazil. I didn't realize at the time that "shatter zone" is the term invented by Richard White in *The Land Between*. Was it *The Land Between*?

03-00:45:07

Holmes: *The Middle Ground*.

03-00:45:08

Scott: *The Middle Ground*, which I had read, actually, but I somehow missed the term "shatter zone" in that book, and it seemed to me to be a perfect metaphor for my understanding of why these areas in the hills are so complex in terms of languages, cultures, burial traditions, and it's because they are the accumulation of runaways over 2,000 years that have become, if you like, ethnic groups in the hills. There's another book, by the way. I may refer to it. It's an edited volume called *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone*, and it's an account of after the huge mortality made possible by Western diseases, the Southeast of the United States had only like 20 percent of its original population. I think they called them in the book "coalescents," or "re-coalescent societies," so that the groups we understand as groups of named native peoples, like Cherokee and Creek and Choctaws and so on, are in fact the federation of groups that were shattered, and in small groups re-coalesced and founded Native American identities over time. But they themselves were like a lash-up of refugees in different places of the remaining population in the Southeast.³

03-00:46:54

Holmes: And in discussing this, one of the points you discuss in regard to these communities in the uplands is this type of loose ethnic identity, an almost adaptability of identity, to reform these type of communities.

³ Robbie Ethridge and Shari M. Shuck-Hall, *Mapping the Mississippi Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South* (University of Kansas, 2009)

03-00:47:09

Scott:

Right. So, yes, when it comes to ethnicity, I'm a radical constructivist. I think all identities are invented—I mean, my best example in that book, and a kind of model, is that of the Cossacks who were serfs who ran away from European Russia, and if they ran to the Don Basin, they become the Don Cossacks. If they ran to the Azov Sea, they become the Azov. I think there are thirteen or sixteen so-called Cossack hosts in terms of where they ran to. And then, once they get there, and this is why they're a good model, I think: they are in a new ecology. They're out of serfdom. They're free. They're in a new ecology. They learn how to ride horseback from the Tatars. They copy Tatar cultural habits. They have common property, and in many of these areas, they become *the* Cossacks, and the Cossacks are not an ethnic group, or they are an ethnic group, but they're an ethnic group that has been created out of, if you like, thin air from people who've escaped from someplace else. And of course, people who escape, often they bring their culture with them.

So it's not as if in the hills of Southeast Asia you don't get groups that have taken a kind of lowland culture and preserved some of it intact, but I want to make the argument that the boundaries—you can practice almost the same rites, and if you start growing white rice, you are no longer a Kachin, but you're a Shan. People understand that if you start to grow rice, you're actually changing ethnicities.

There's so many examples, I think, across the world, that show us this, radical constructionist and one of my favorite books, it's a polemic, but I try to give it to Jewish friends, it's called *The Invention of the Jewish People*. So this idea that the Jews of today are the direct genealogical, genetic descendants of the people after the Second Temple was destroyed. It's nonsense, right? It can't be true for any group at all, and so a lot of my Jewish friends refuse to read this book because it seems to question the claim to the Holy Land, but I don't question the claim to a Holy Land. I just want to make sure that they understand that Judaism, there's been people leaving and entering Judaism from other ethnic groups forever and ever and ever, and they're not going to convince me that this is some genetic module that's come through, in whole, from the Second Temple at Caesar's time. Crazy.

03-00:50:03

Holmes:

One of the aspects, too, that you hit on, which I think, again, shows your keen eye of resistance, is in looking at the "backward or primitive" rhythms of these communities, and highlighting their practice of escape agriculture as well as what you call the "postliterate" kind of traditions of the society. Discuss that a little bit, because it's exactly that turning, that contrarian move of taking what others had seen as primitive, and you're putting it in the realm of resistance.

03-00:50:49

Scott:

That's one of those things where people point out things to my work that I was not conscious of at the time, but obviously is a thread that is there. I have to admit it, it's not a thread of which I was directly conscious until fairly

recently. So, one of the blurbs for *Against the Grain* is by David Wengrow, and he says, "A contemporary master of the counter-narrative has just written this book," blah, blah, blah. The idea that I'm a counter-narrative boy is something that I recognize, but I'd never thought of myself that way. It's true that whenever I encounter a kind of theory, my first question is to say, "Well, how would it have looked if you turned the whole fucking thing upside down? Does that make just as much sense?" Since you were there at the conference on Wood in Asia, I thought, why Asia? Why would we be concerned with Asia as a concept about wood when it goes through so many latitudes, and completely different climatological zones? Doesn't make any sense, and why wood rather than forest or trees? So, it is a contrarian spirit, and a kind of "Wait a minute, this may be bullshit." I am a contrarian, obviously, and I like to think that in the case of, let's say the hill peoples in Southeast Asia, it happens to be a much better account of how this situation developed historically.

The word "Zomia," by the way, speaking of my pilfering and stealing, is borrowed from a Dutch geographer named Willem van Schendel. In the Tibeto-Burman languages, Chin language in particular, the word "*mizo*"—*zo* means the people, and *mi* means the people far away from one's center, like a people outside. And so, Mizoram in India is, in fact, *mizo* as a particular state, and so, it means, if you like, the people at the periphery. Willem van Schendel has this wonderful idea: "Why don't we have centers of Zomia studies, rather than studies for Vietnam? Why do we take the nation states so seriously when there's this huge area that is outside of all these nation states? Let's call it Zomia." I thought it was a beautiful idea. So if you like, I stole his idea while promoting it at the same time.

03-00:54:13

Holmes:

I wanted to talk about a bit of the reception to this book. You have "Anarchist History" in the subtitle. If you read the book, you realize why that may be in the title, but it also raises the fear of any author of being misread. What was the reception to having "An Anarchist History" in the subtitle?

03-00:54:42

Scott:

It was not my choice. That is to say, I have an editor whom I love dearly at Yale Press, Jean Thomson Black, and presses somehow think that they become proprietors of titles and covers and so on, and that they know better than you do what title will work. And so, the subtitle would have been something else. I forget what it was originally. *The Art of Not Being Governed*, speaking of theft—there was a guy teaching an anarchist course at Wisconsin, and a friend said, "Oh, I have this colleague who's teaching a course called The Art of Not Being Governed," and I said, "That's what I want for my title." I asked his permission, and he gave me the title. Same is true for *Against the Grain*, by the way. I asked someone permission if I could use that title that they had first used. Where was I? I forgot where I was.

03-00:55:50

Holmes: That subtitle of "Anarchist History."

03-00:55:52

Scott: Oh yes, so, Jean Thomson Black suggested that "An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia" would be good, I think she thought, for sales. It wasn't my first choice, but I respect her opinion, and I was kind of worried that it would sound too doctrinaire, that I, somehow, went in with a whole kind of anarchist view, which I didn't. And so, I sort of said, "Okay, I guess that's okay," and I think it's actually stood up fairly well. It's not as if I have a lot of things that are part of anarchist theory, but it's about opposition to the state, and so, I think it's not inappropriate to have it as part of the title. I think there are a lot of people who took it badly, and thought that it was doctrinaire, but I think if they read it, they'll see that the case I make is a plausible one.

03-00:57:09

Holmes: Well I wanted to talk next about your next work, which also has "Anarchism" in the title: *Two Cheers for Anarchism*. This is a further, and more personal, it seems, exploration of the use and utility of an anarchist perspective when it comes to history and the everyday world. This is where you use the term "an anarchist squint." It is a collection of essays. Discuss how the idea for this book came about.

03-00:57:48

Scott: So, it came about as a result of an interview I had with somebody at Cambridge University in England who did a kind of profile of me, and I'm embarrassed to say I can't remember, I've got his name confused right now. He's a very wise man nearing retirement, and I told him that my pattern of writing had gotten ridiculously anal compulsive, and obsessive. I worked on huge, wide sheets of paper across a desk that was sixteen feet long. For *The Art of Not Being Governed*, for example, I had five or six huge sheets with little collections of germs of an idea, and all the references to the books from which it came, and the ideas associated with it.

And so I had this sort of insane, anal compulsive map of all the ideas written down on all these pieces of paper, one over the other, with lines drawn between them in terms of connections, and chapter clusters. It got so anal compulsive that it took me, for *The Art of Not Being Governed*, three months to actually do all of the papers right, to get all of this down on the papers from which I could then put my arms around a book and each chapter, and so on. It seemed to me to be clogged and anal compulsive and self-defeating at some level, and to require a level of detail that maybe wasn't necessary, that I overwhelmed people with too much, like a data dump. He said, "You must read Lafcadio Hearn," who was an Englishman or Irishman, who lived most of his life in Japan and wrote children's books, and had a kind of theory of how you write, and he was an admirer of Lafcadio Hearn's theory of writing.

So he sent me a page with a lot of little epigrams from Lafcadio Hearn on how to write, and I got this idea. As I said to you earlier, I found myself, over the ten years before that, saying things that sounded like anarchists, and taught a course in anarchism. So I had kind of thought through of what an anarchist analysis of a social movement might look like, what anarchist analysis of charisma might look like, and I was an early subscriber to the *Fifth Estate*, which is an anarchist journal out of Michigan, and Colin Ward, *Anarchism in Action*.

So if you like, I had a little avocation, side avocation of reading anarchist literature and following contemporary anarchist squatter movements and so on. The person at Princeton [University] Press, who had made a nice offer for *The Art of Not Being Governed*, although I gave it to Yale, I felt kind of bad and I said, "Well I'll give you my next book." And then I thought, well maybe I should do a book along the lines of advice of Lafcadio Hearn and this guy at Cambridge, and I should just try to sort of write kind of freehand without a lot of footnotes, and have a series of vignettes about how anarchism can teach us the "anarchist squint," as I call it, how it can teach us to sort of see things in a certain way that is clarifying and maybe better than the way in which we understand these things now.

And so, that's the origin of that book, and it's a book that's not my general style, because I want basically to disappear myself, but I start out that book with a kind of personal account of me at a farm in Eastern Germany after the Wall comes down, and my red light story of the "anarchist calisthenics." And so for me, it was a complete departure in how to write, and it was fun. I haven't done it quite again, but I was pleased because it showed that you can teach an old dog a new trick, or at least make a stab at a new trick.

03-01:03:08

Holmes:

Well I want to discuss what you called "Scott's Law of Anarchist Calisthenics," and even sharing the German story, the red light. What's interesting about that, which maybe a lot of readers don't understand, is that you took a sabbatical to Germany. Is that correct?

03-01:03:30

Scott:

Yes, a sabbatical from Yale. I had an invitation from a think tank in Berlin called the Wissenschaftskolleg, and it's a sort of a year at a think tank, and I wanted to do that, and my wife Louise wanted to do that too. And it was 1990, '91, so this was just the year after the Wall came down, so it was an exciting time to be in Germany. I had had one year of high school German, of college German, actually, and my German was really pathetic, and I decided that I wanted—I love learning languages and I'm not a natural language learner. I'm not bad, but I'm not kind of a genius the way I know some people who pick up languages very quickly, but I love the sort of process of learning a language. And so, what would be painful for other people, I find kind of enjoyable, and I decided I learned languages better by the sink-or-swim method than by in a

classroom, and although it's very painful and lonely, I think it's the best way to learn a language because actually, it's like recovering your humanity, because you're stupid and you're not interesting to people. You can't understand a joke; you can't tell a joke. And so, I arranged with the Wissenschaftskolleg to find me a place on an ex-collective farm to spend six weeks in East Germany.

I was near the Polish border, near Neubrandenburg, and it was an ex-collective farm. I stayed with the head of the collective farm, now called a cooperative, and nobody spoke a word of English, and they were suspicious of me. I was unhappy the whole time there, but it was fabulous for my German. As I said, I spent six weeks there, and I went away one day a week to Neubrandenburg just to clear my head, because it was so hard for me, and they were happy to see me go away for a day, too, I think. I'd spend the day in Neubrandenburg just walking around. I was so boring to most people, because my German was weak at the beginning, that the only people I could get to really hang out with me were high school teachers who were running a summer camp for kids. I would go every night to drink with them and I'd buy the alcohol, and they'd tolerate me as long as I was buying the alcohol. I would get German conversation, and they would tolerate my stumbling German sentences, as long as I was buying the drinks, and so, it was great for my German.

Anyway, in Neubrandenburg, I would spend a day there, and my little cooperative farm was in the middle of the fields. It was a tiny little village of maybe sixty households, and if you wanted to get off the train at that village, you had to tell the conductor to stop, because otherwise it wasn't a stop. They'd stop in the middle of the fields and let you down to walk across the fields to get back to the village, and you had to wave a flag to stop the train to pick you up to go to Neubrandenburg.

And so, I was always concerned about missing the one train back in the evening and what I would do if I had to spend the night on a park bench in Neubrandenburg, and so, I would come a half hour early to the train station. And there was a set of traffic lights that was set, I'm sure, for the daytime vehicle traffic and pedestrian traffic, but this was early September, still. The schools had not begun. It was still warm and people were out walking in large numbers, and there was no traffic. This was like 10:00. My train was at 10 p.m., and I was always there by 9:30 at the latest, and every week I had the same scene in which the light took something like five to six minutes to change, and there'd be a dozen, two dozen, three dozen, four dozen Germans accumulating, waiting for a light to change. And, like Holland, it's completely flat, you can see five miles in every direction. There's no traffic coming, and all these Germans are waiting for the light to change. They won't cross the street, and I thought, this is crazy! There's nothing coming. You can see five miles either way, and after the third or fourth time, it sort of bugged me that the Germans weren't crossing.

And so, if my last German sentence had worked well and I was feeling confident, I would just cross all by myself and I'd get scolded. If my last German sentence had been a failure, which was often the case, I just waited with them like a sheep for the light to change. And I got this idea about what I call "Scott's Theory of Anarchist Calisthenics," that, at some point in your life—think of the sit-ins in the South, of nonviolent resistance, and so on—at some time in your life, you're going to have to break a big law, and you have to be ready for it. You have to have the courage, and so on, and how are you going to do this? You do this by staying in shape, and the way in which you stay in shape is doing what I call "anarchist calisthenics," which is to break a small law every two or three days so that when the time comes, and it really matters, you're able to break a law.

03-01:09:40

Holmes:

I love that story. I wanted to ask, in this book, you provide so many vignettes in these essays—some personal, some just intelligent observations—showing that from school testing to playgrounds, to even the petty bourgeoisie, that an everyday insubordination, a kind of a breaking of the rules, allows us to see, the world in a different way. Some could say you're also, it seems, making the case intellectually, that such calisthenics not just apply to everyday life, but also maybe to one's work as well.

03-01:10:40

Scott:

That's an interesting observation. I hadn't made the connection, but the connection makes perfectly good sense. It's a way of, it seems to me, that one advantage of the anarchist squint is that it asks you always to say, "Does this make sense?" So the idea of why am I standing waiting for a red light to change, I'm letting the red light do my thinking for me, and it's stupid, and it's contrary to sort of rational behavior. So the anarchist's squint says, "Does this arrangement make sense? Does this source of authority have any right to tell you what to do?"

The other thing, I suppose, for me, anyway, is that there were all kinds of things that seem to be powerful and I thought belonged under the anarchist squint flag. One of them was the study of the village of Chambon in France that saved all these Jews, and that if you ask people, theoretically, would they help Jews, they said no, because they had a family and a farm, and if they helped Jews, they'd be sent to the camps themselves, and destroy their family. But if you brought a shivering Jewish family to them, and to stand in front of their door and look them in the eye and said, "Would you hide these people in your barn?" they'd say almost always yes, because they couldn't look this person in the eye and refuse them. And so in a sense, they were practically humanitarian in a way that theoretically you couldn't get them to agree to, and it seemed to me there's something powerful in that. Actually, a Jewish friend of mine said, "There's the saying: 'the hand leads the heart,'" that you, in a sense, make the gesture, and then you draw the conclusions from it, as these people did.

And so it seemed to me there were lots of things that were like anarchist aperçu that I had had here and there, including what was, as you say, it was a collection of things that I had thought and written a little bit about. So the essay on the beanie and citation counts was something I did to make fun of Yale's 300th anniversary, and the thing on the petty bourgeoisie, I did another version of a long time ago. And so that is often seen as the most reactionary piece that I've ever written, but actually, I've gotten, in equal measure, notes of anger and indignation as well as notes of praise and thanks for that chapter.

03-01:14:10
Holmes:

One reviewer, which I think put it somewhat nicely, says, "In Scott's hands, anarchism is not an insurrectory politics, but a self-help strategy, a personal faith that promises a freer, more productive life." What are your thoughts on that? Because, in many respects, which you have even point out, abolishing the state as seen under anarchism is not feasible, but an anarchist type of squint or attitude actually allows us to move further beyond that. What were your thoughts on that?

03-01:14:56
Scott:

Yeah. That's why, for example, I love the work of Colin Ward, and one example is *Anarchism in Action*. He was the editor in England of the *Anarchist Weekly* for a long time, and a house squatter after the Second World War, and so on. He must have died five or six years ago, and what he was good at is the understanding that people act in anarchist ways without ever having come across the word "anarchism," "anarchy," ever studied any theory. It's this exercise of kind of autonomous action and cooperation, and of course, the problem with the word "anarchism," that I make clear but probably not clear enough, is that in most people's mouths, the word "anarchy" means chaos, disorder, and is completely negative; whereas, anarchism as understood by anarchists, theorists of every stripe—except the propagandist of the deed—as cooperation without hierarchy, forms of collaboration that are not vertical and not hierarchical. That's a kind of democratic practice, and it's practiced in all kinds of little groups.

And so my little section on the—is it the Amsterdam or Copenhagen playground that is open—actually, it's not anarchist. I do this at the end of *Seeing Like a State* in which I compare the Iwo Jima Monument to Maya Lin's, the Vietnam [Veterans] Memorial, and the difference between them to me is that the Iwo Jima Monument is closed in a certain way. It's about heroism. It's about planting the flag on the top of Mount Suribachi in Iwo Jima, and it tells you exactly what to think about the conquest of the Pacific, and the defeat of the Japanese, and it's a tribute to the people who fought and died in Iwo Jima, but it tells you exactly what to think. It's not open to a lot of interpretive latitude.

Whereas Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, partly because the war itself was more problematic for lots of people who were for and against it and so on, it's

just a list of all the people who died in that war, in this long wall. The extraordinary thing about it to me is that they wanted to list people by branch of service, and she refused. Then the Pentagon—speaking of *Seeing Like a State*—wanted to list them alphabetically, the way any schoolteacher would, I suppose, a bureaucracy. She said, "No, people have to be listed in the order in which they fell," so that you have to look for where your loved one is, and they're going to be next to the people who fell in the same engagement or in the same day. So there's a kind of equality, everybody, people for the war, against the war, ambiguous about the war, they can come to the Vietnam Memorial and bring their hopes and dreams and politics and so on, and it's open to them. So, in a sense, it's an anarchist monument in the sense that it gives the greatest interpretive freedom to the people who come there and doesn't tell them what to think about it.

03-01:18:53

Holmes:

I think that was one of the most striking aspects about *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, is that in a lot of ways, you're trying to reach a broad audience again, but also dislodge their preconceptions of what actually anarchism is, how it functions, because most people see the term and they think exactly what you point out in that introduction, that this isn't about chaos. It's about cooperation without structures and hierarchies in order.

03-01:19:22

Scott:

Right, right, right. Again, as you say, I am here rehabilitating a term and saying, "Hey, look at this again. You should be more favorably inclined to an anarchist perspective," and as I also say, as you noted, that "it's not as if we're going to overthrow the state." On the other hand, there's an implicit anarchist spirit in lots of very noble political acts that do kind of change the world, and there's something that wrote that—it's on my refrigerator door, actually—that Ben Kerkvliet, who was my first graduate student, sent me, and it's in German. It's sort of, "All kinds of little people doing little acts in little ways in little places have changed the world," and it's essentially that kind of anarchist spirit: "*Die kleine Leute, in viele kleine Orten*"—anyway, it's a kind of beautiful little saying.

03-01:20:39

Holmes:

I wanted to move next to your most recent work, which I want to discuss a little bit more in our next session, but in many respects, *Seeing Like a State* as well as your work *Hidden Transcripts* and *Everyday Forms of Resistance*, those three works together, would you say really allowed you to plant a foot in the field of anthropology?

03-01:21:06

Scott:

Yes, although, once again, you're finding a continuity that wasn't conscious in terms of what I was doing. So, I guess in this context, we're saying that I, without any particular plan, from book to book, or course to course, I hop from one thing to the next thing I find interesting, exciting, and fun. So, I have an ethic of pure, hedonistic, intellectual enjoyment without paying much

attention to whether it makes sense. Of course, obviously, from one thing you can establish the relationship between that thing and the next thing, in retrospect, although it's not something that I thought through. So, for example, if we can talk about *Against the Grain*, I never would have done except that—what's the word I'm after—except for predatory reasons. That is to say, the Tanner Lectures, which are given in several universities every year, Tanner Lectures on Human Values. They pay \$20,000 for two lectures, and it's not a small amount of money for an academic, and I give a lot of money to the Burmese political prisoners. So to me, an opportunity like this is an opportunity to also give some money to Burmese political prisoners, plus, in fact, I kept some of it myself.

But in any case, they asked me whether I would do the lectures at Harvard, several years back, and I said I had just finished, I guess I had just finished *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, or maybe it was *The Art of Not Being Governed*, and I said, "No, I don't have anything new to say. I'm just getting started and I'm enjoying"—one of the things that happens to lots of scholars is, after you finish a book, the kind of reading that you do toward the end of a book is kind of plundering, a rapist reading almost, in which you just want stuff for your own book. You're reading in a sort of opportunistic, predatory way, and after you finish a book, I find there's a kind of six-month period anyway in which you have no particular project, and you're reading things, and you read a book for the pleasure of where it will take you without any ulterior motives.

And so, I was enjoying that and I didn't want to give this lecture for the Tanner people, and I said, "Can you put it off for a year? I'll probably have something to say on rivers or something or other," and they said, "No, you either do it this year, or you don't do it at all." They didn't say it in exactly that way, but it was clear. This was like September, and I had to give the lectures in April, or something like that. I had the year off, and my partner and I were going to this place in Greece—we spent three months in Greece—and I thought, what can I do without a library in this little, rocky, Mediterranean village for the lectures, that won't be a disgrace, and the only idea I had at that time was that I had been giving this course on agrarian studies, and I had always given the lecture on the domestication of the first crops and cereals, and the domestication of animals, and the early states. I'd been giving that lecture for a decade or two, but I realized it was kind of out of date, and I thought, okay, I can do those two lectures in a much better way if I read some archeology, and if I read all the stuff that we've discovered about early agriculture and domestication. And so, I thought, I can do that in three months, and I did.

I took as much material as I could to this place in Greece, and I wrote those two lectures, and I realized halfway through that we had learned so much about Mesopotamia and early agriculture and domestication, that the stuff I had been teaching was wrong. And so, the actual lectures that I gave were a kind of registering of my astonishment at what I had wrong, and it sent me

back to another three years of reading and work after which I then produced this counter-narrative about early civilization that is definitely not your grandmother's story of civilization.

03-01:26:52

Holmes:

Well, and to put the full name in the transcript, the book, which was published in 2017, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. It's interesting to hear that back story of how this actually came about. What I also think is interesting, again making a perception from the bird's eye view of history, is that we see in earlier works that you, as a trained political scientist, start to plant your feet in anthropology as a Southeast Asian scholar, and then here, the story of grain and rise of civilization pushes you to plant your foot in history.

03-01:27:44

Scott:

Right. So, yes, again in retrospect, I started out as a political scientist, and whatever else you can say about political scientists, they tend to both not pay attention to what people actually say, and to small communities and so on, to personal testimony, and so, I defected, because I wanted to study peasants. I defected from political science to anthropology, and whatever you want to say about anthropologists, the fact is that anthropologists, their great thing is that they pay attention to what people say, what they're doing, and understand their culture and their context of action. For me, there's a kind of fundamental respect for human consciousness and phenomenology that's at the core of anthropology, which is why I envy it and copy it in some extent. But whatever else you say about anthropology, it tends to be ahistorical. It tends not to have any kind of deep history.

You will have noticed, in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, that's a kind of 2,000-year history, so already I find myself going back into deep history, the *longue durée*, and everything looks different when you look at things over a long, long period of time. Neither political scientists nor anthropologists do that, by and large. And so, I became envious of especially deep history, of *longue durée* history. There's a big band of followers of Marc Bloch and the Annales school of historiography and *longue durée*, but I didn't really practice it. So, starting with *The Art of Not Being Governed*, I actually do try to do deep history, and *Against the Grain* is not only deep history, but there I actually ended by having to read a lot of genetic work on domestications, and also archeological work. I was terrified that I was just going to get shot down and pelted with tomatoes and bricks for trespassing and not understanding, and so because I was scared, I did as much work as I could possibly do to try to read all of this stuff, and assimilate it, and do justice to it, and respect a new scholarship, and be reasonably comprehensive. There were a lot of people who helped me with this as well, saying, "Oh, you should read this. You should read that."

And so, I'm not a Mesopotamianist; I'm not an archeologist, but by and large, the people who are Mesopotamianists and who are archeologists have liked the book. There are a lot of people who like it because it fucks up the narrative of civilization and they want the narrative of civilization to be fucked up anyway, but it means more to me that the people who know the archeology and know the history and know Mesopotamia, that they generally liked it, and they thought it was, at the very least, a competent account. And so that meant a lot to me; my fear and terror was calmed when I got such nice reviews.

03-01:31:47
Holmes:

Well, maybe you could discuss how you began to see this process and work, going from the triumphant story of the rise of civilization—the cultivation of grains, settlement, agriculture, and cities—to thinking about what we see if actually turn this on its head?

03-01:32:29
Scott:

Well, the way to begin, I guess, is with the fact, that narrative that I'm overturning is a narrative that I believed. This was the lecture I was giving about how we domesticated grains and we became sedentary, and we had the concentration of people that allowed us to have towns, et cetera, and then those towns led to civilization, and so I had almost everything wrong. So I wish I were able to assemble all those students who I was misleading again and say, "Okay, read this book; now you understand why I gave you the wrong lectures." So, for me, it was a genuine disillusionment of the narrative that I had absorbed in some fundamental way.

So for me, to discover, first of all, that the Lower Euphrates Valley was not dry and arid, but it was an abundant wetland, that was a revelation to me, and a revelation to lots of people. We owe it to this fantastic scholar, Jennifer Pournelle for that. So that was a revelation to me, the idea that there are at least 4,000 years that separate the domestication of grains—our first firm evidence of grains that have been planted and so on—and actual villages living by agriculture, that that unsettles the narrative. If this was such a great advance, why didn't people immediately jump into agriculture and grow their crops, and the idea that this was an improvement in health and leisure and so on, it turns out, of course, to be wrong as well. For me, actually, this was a revelation only when I was starting to write, and I realized that at the core of all of these ideas is that we wanted to settle down. I understand from the best recent work that, for the longest time, people moved between pastoralism and agriculture and hunting and gathering, and fishing and gathering, and foraging, depending on climatic conditions, and population and states, and so on, and so the idea that there's this tremendous fluidity—it's not a stage. Okay, we were hunters and gatherers and foragers, and then we invented agriculture and then we settled down. That does not accord with the facts.

So at the core of this, and I probably think I don't emphasize it as much as I should, because it seems to me to be so central, and it's the idea that we

wanted to settle down, the idea that we couldn't wait to stop moving around and to live in one place with a hearth, and that's the sort of domus stuff. The fact is that every time we've tried to stop people who are pastoralists and itinerant, we found ourselves with a war on our hands, as with Native Americans and so on. So, I think the deepest, deepest prejudice of civilization is this idea that the only way to live—I mean, of course now, it's the only way people can possibly live—but then, it was just one of many, many, many alternatives, and an alternative that was not desirable for most people. And so the idea of sedentism, which we all take for granted and assume to be the most desirable way to live, doesn't make any sense for the sixth millennium before Christ.

03-01:36:35

Holmes:

One of the interesting aspects of your discussion on grain actually goes back to *Seeing Like a State*, the concept of legibility, and how this crop, in comparison to other crops, from planting to storage, to being able to record units, this was perfect for the state, if we think of taxation, or a percentage of sharecropping, what have you. How did this lens of looking at grain begin for you?

03-01:37:46

Scott:

Once again, you're discovering a continuity that I wasn't conscious of at the time, but it's true that, in fact, my argument about why the cereal grains were the basis of states has everything to do with legibility, and it's not something that I discussed in *Seeing Like a State*, but it's part of that optic—it fits very nicely into that argument about the state being able to control the major subsistence good, cadastral surveys, concentrating population, and so on. So I affirm the fact that this is continuity, but it's not a continuity I would have brought to your attention until you just mentioned it now. I do understand that there's a direct continuity between *The Art of Not Being Governed* and escape agriculture, as opposed to state agriculture, and so, you could argue that the one part of *Against the Grain* that was kind of worked out beforehand is this question of state agriculture and escape agriculture.

03-01:39:13

Holmes:

In giving a contrarian twist to the civilization myth, you also point out that for most people living during these times, living in the cities was most likely worse than living on the outskirts. This again is contrary to the way that we've often seen things, that living in the city opens up all sorts of new opportunities and these kind of things. Discuss maybe a little bit of your thinking on that. Was this something that also predated the writing of the book or is this something you begin to piece together during the research?

03-01:39:57

Scott:

No, It's a kind of criticism that's been made, and I think it's a criticism of omission rather than commission. It's not that I have things wrong. It's that I ought to have emphasized that the city is a place of opportunity, commerce, wealth, becoming a high priest, becoming a clerk, becoming a merchant, and

so on. So in these very, very, very early civilizations there are this, which is the standard civilizational story of the bright lights—that's anachronistic, but the idea that they're the bright lights of the city, and the opportunities, then people are drawn to the city and its opportunities, and we get this from [Honoré de] Balzac, as you know.

So, I ought to have said, yes, of course this is true for a portion of the urban population, maybe 20 percent of the urban population, specialized artisans and those who live by the labor of others, who don't have to cultivate themselves, and who live on taxes and dues, and slavery, et cetera, but for the other 80 percent of the population, the city is a bad deal. And for the whole population of the city. Something that is, I think, a bit novel, even for the ancient historians and the archeologists, is my argument about epidemics and diseases of crowding in the cities. I get that by bringing two different literatures together so that, even for wealthy people, the city was much less healthy and you're much more likely to die of an infectious, communicable disease in the city than you were spread out on the countryside.

03-01:42:19

Holmes:

One of the unique aspects about this work is that, unlike in perhaps other histories, we see the "barbarians", if you will, actually take center stage, in talking about again, this kind of barbarian frontier, a kind of a stateless frontier. As you point out, when we look at the rhythms of their life, and vis-à-vis the state, the "barbarians", hunters, gatherers, were actually much freer than perhaps those in the urban dwellings.

03-01:43:01

Scott:

Right. And so, the Romans, to take one example, they distinguish between the Celts and the Germans, and the Celts have these things called "oppida." I'm not sure I'm pronouncing it correctly, but these are, if you like, trading towns, small trading towns, and they are the Celtic trading towns that dot the periphery of the Roman Empire. They controlled, for example, a sort of river of trade or set of passes and roads and so on, and so, these are, if you like, quasi-civilized barbarians, the Celts. They're not a state. They're not an empire. They are a culture, though, because they're the same; they share similar cultural patterns. They are barbarians who are parasitic on the trading periphery of the empire. Then there are the Germans who are the true barbarians who live in the forests and so on.

And so, it seems to me that, if we're talking about the Celts or an example of barbarians trading with the empire who live by this, they depend on the empire. Without the empire, they're toast; they are free but they have all the advantages of exchange and trade and barter, and collection of tolls and so on, of goods leaving and going to the empire. So in a sense, they have the commercial advantages of the city, and avoid all the disadvantages of being subordinate and enslaved, and a subject. The Germanic tribes are seen as forest people who have only a tenuous relationship with the Roman Empire

and one dominated by hostility. They, of course, are trading with the Celts who are then trading with the Romans as well.

03-01:45:34

Holmes:

One of the aspects, and you've done this in some of your other works, thinking of the term "barbarian," and the dialectic that it seems to have with civilization—

03-01:45:49

Scott:

Well I do that and I'm guilty other places, too, I think. I've got my polemical side, so that I make it clear that what I mean by the term "barbarian" is people who have not been incorporated into the state. I mean to say nothing about their level of culture, language, oral myths, and their kind of sophistication in the world. In fact, I learned in *The Art of Not Being Governed* that you have people who were completely indistinguishable from one another in terms of culture, but the ones that were administered by the Chinese state became the cooked barbarians—that is to say, quasi-civilized—and the others raw barbarians. There's nothing different between them. It's just that the cooked barbarians are administered by Chinese magistrates, and therefore have come under the control of the state. And so, I mean "barbarian" to be an administrative political category rather than a cultural category, and I use the term "barbarians" so that you get used to saying, "Barbarians are okay." To call them "non-state peoples" would somehow have been less fluid as a way of writing about them, and it has more punch to call them "barbarians" as long as you understand the special sense in which I mean "barbarian."

03-01:47:30

Holmes:

Well, and I think what's interesting about that discussion is that you, again, push the reader to rethink the term and where it derives from, and its connection to state rule in civilization.

03-01:48:06

Scott:

My understanding of the word "barbarian" is that it's a Greek word, and it means non-Greek. For the Greeks, I gather, when they heard Persian spoken, they couldn't understand it, and it sounded to them like "ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba," and so "barbarian," and of course, the Persians were quite as civilized as the Greeks. It was a contending, opposing civilization. These were not the kind of people up in the hills who didn't have states. I recommend everybody read Thucydides's *Peloponnesian Wars*, because it's a fun read for one thing, but also, you realize when Athens goes to war, they're collecting all these little statelets, statelets and little tribal societies that they're allied with, and so, half of their troops are this kind of alliance of people from this valley, who are not governed directly by Athens but who are allies of Athens and who would like to participate in the plunder of their wars and take their share. So the Athenians depend on a bunch of barbarian neighbors—just the way the British use the Gurkhas, and many colonial regimes use hill peoples and nomads and so on, in order to beat the hell out of the major population that they govern.

03-01:49:48

Holmes:

You make a remark towards the end of the book that, "The closing of the frontier equaled a closing of an alternative way of life." Discuss that a little bit. It's almost self-explanatory in some respects, but it's one of those, I think, insights that's so easy to overlook when we are inculcated into this civilization myth and narrative.

03-01:50:34

Scott:

I'm afraid I don't remember having said that. I'm sure it makes perfectly good sense that I would say it, about the closing of the frontier. What I remember saying, which maybe essentially where this comes from, is the idea that where grain growing ended, the Roman Empire ended, and that where grain no longer grew, was no longer planted, this was the territory of the barbarians, whether they were allied barbarians or enemy barbarians, and so on. And this works out very nicely, by the way, in China as well, that when you go from the grain area to the grasslands, from the Chinese to the Mongols, when you leave the sort of Han Chinese and get people who live by a different subsistence, this is always seen as a cultural frontier, and so, these people dress differently; they have a different diet.

So, for the Romans, having grain—I remember this in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*: Caesar somewhere says that "the Gauls only bathe when they get caught out in a thundershower or fall into a stream; otherwise, they never wash, and Romans wash every day." Having a bath every day is sort of like how the Japanese see themselves, as sort of daily bathers, and they'd die if they didn't have a bath every day. But, for the Romans, they are wheat eaters, grain eaters, bread eaters, and the Gauls eat dairy products and meat, and that makes them uncivilized, and the same: the Chinese also say that, "these people don't eat rice; they eat meat," and so on.

So there is this: when you come to an ecological frontier, you come almost always to an ethnic frontier, and you often come to a political frontier in which that state no longer controls these areas. So, in that sense, it does close off another way of life.

03-01:53:00

Holmes:

Lastly, I wanted to ask about the reception for the book. Now I know it just came out last year. Did it meet your expectations, exceed your expectations? Does one even have expectations at this stage when you put a book out? What were your thoughts on how it's been received?

03-01:53:21

Scott:

I couldn't be more delighted, beating my own breast. I was really worried about this book because I thought it was a bridge too far, that, "Okay, Scott's gotten too big for his britches, he doesn't know what he's talking about, and this is stupid, uninformed, and so on," and as I said, I made a real effort to do my homework and do a good job of putting all that stuff under my belt, but I was completely insecure. The most scared I've been at giving a talk that I can

remember for a long, long, long time is giving a talk to the Institute of Archeology in London, when I thought, "Holy shit." I chose the infectious disease because I thought they would know the least about that and I might be able to get away with it, and that went over quite well. David Wengrow, who I had been in touch with, he's the guy who invited me to come, and I accepted. Then I thought, "Oh my God, why have I agreed to walk into the lion's den? They're going to throw me to the lions like they threw the Christians at the lions."

And so for me, I can't be more delighted at how well the book has done, and Yale Press, butter wouldn't melt in my mouth for the Yale Press these days because they sold a lot of books, and they were surprised too, I think. So, and as you can see, for the first time ever, they stuffed in a lot of other reviews, and an extra page of reviews because they were good reviews, and there were lots of them. So, yeah, it makes me relaxed about having to write another book. Nobody cares. Scott can rest on his laurels for another year or two. Though I hope to write something on the Ayeyarwady River in Burma—I've even said that to my sons—I will be eighty-two years old in December, so I'm an old fart, and not many people have written a book at eighty. Most people have hung up their coat and retired, and so I feel like it's a way of extending my useful academic life, that I'm very lucky.

03-01:56:15

Holmes:

Well, maybe that's a good place to stop. Thanks, Jim.

Interview 4: September 23, 2018

04-00:00:05

Holmes:

All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 23, 2018, and this is our fourth and final session with James C. Scott for his oral history, as part of the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. Jim, thanks again for all your time during these sessions, and for hosting me here at your beautiful farm, which I should say that we are here at his farm in the beautiful city of Durham, Connecticut.

In this session, I wanted to talk about the Program in Agrarian Studies that you helped build. But before we get there, I'd like to talk a little bit about your time at Yale, and maybe start off, as you've mentioned in a couple of our sessions, with the unique seminars that you've taught to both undergraduates and graduates throughout the years, unique classes that you've often seemed to craft around interests that you were also trying to think through.

04-00:01:09

Scott:

Yes, there are two kinds of, or maybe three kinds of courses that I've taught. I've often taught in the Agrarian Studies seminar for graduate students, which is the best example of that. I've taught with two other people. So the Agrarian Studies' "Introduction to the Comparative Study of Agrarian Societies" has always involved three, and I think once or twice, four professors, and it's the biggest graduate class in Yale's history and continues to be. What's wonderful about it, of course, is that if you're teaching with someone else, you're kind of listening to their lectures. It's not as if we take turns. We take turns lecturing, but we're all there all the time. So the point is, we're listening to one another, and having a discussion with one another that's good for the students because they, in a sense, have room to maneuver. They realize that we don't always agree, that the gods have clay feet, and that they have some running room. And so, there's part of me that wants to never teach a course all by myself ever again, because it's always nice to teach with someone else. You learn a tremendous amount that way.

Aside from that, the format of one or two or three or four professors, my courses have been either two kinds: either the kind of course in which I didn't know a hell of a lot and I decided to teach the course as a way of pushing myself and trying to understand something—"Experience of Powerlessness and Dependency" was that kind of course. The anarchism course, when I taught it, was that—to teach myself as much as to teach the students. The course I'm teaching now on rivers is a kind of run-up to what I hope will be a book on the Ayeyarwady River in Burma and on rivers in general. And I found, for what it's worth, that, I think for students, the courses are more exciting if there're things that I haven't figured out. And so in that sense, I think, despite the fact that I haven't perhaps read all the material that would make me an expert in that field, my excitement and the learning comes across, and that makes the course, I think, more exciting for students.

The other, final kind of course that I do are courses in which I've written a book and I've decided to teach the course that essentially covers much of the same material, whether it's peasant politics, whether it's the politics of Southeast Asia, whether it's comparative politics, and so on. Those are courses in which I'm more or less, as much as any professor is, in command of the material that I'm teaching, and those are partly service courses, because I do think we have an obligation to give people a kind of foundation. For what it's worth, actually—I've never done it, I've suggested it and there were a bunch of students who thought they would like to do it—to have a yearlong Agrarian Studies seminar in which people would cover all of the classics. Basically, they'd cover Marc Bloch, this A. V. Chayanov; they'd cover the classics of agrarian society in Rome and in China; and theories of peasant economy. The idea would be a real Jesuit sort of boot camp of a whole year in which you had a modest number of students, and at the end of the year, you could certify them as agrarian specialists, that they really had covered the basic foundational texts. After that, it's up to them, of course. So there's a part of me that would have liked to have made this a kind of monastic, Jesuit boot camp.

04-00:05:42

Holmes:

During your career, and if we look at the array of courses that you've taught, political science as a field had shifted quite a bit. The rise of a quantitative focus in later decades seemed to, if not dominate political science, at least take up a large space within the field. Discuss your experience offering these innovative, interdisciplinary courses amid this shift. Was there ever pushback by the department, or was there an embracement of expanding, or it's still exploring those fields of political science?

04-00:06:28

Scott:

So, the nice thing about Yale and my department is that they have never had any objections to the things that I wanted to teach and how I wanted to teach them. Even those people who thought that this might not be at the center of political science and was an outlier, they were happy to give me a long leash and let me teach what I wanted to teach. So the department, it's not as if they've urged me to teach these things, but they've been completely tolerant and supportive when I wanted to teach them.

I think, they understand in general, two things: one is that most of political science has to do with American politics; that's essentially the center. We're just as ethnocentric the way if you were doing it in France, you'd be focused on France or England. And so, I'm already a kind of luxury and certainly in Southeast Asia, I'm a real luxury. It's not China, or India, or kind of major area of the world, although we're talking about eight different countries with different classical traditions and so on.

So, they've given me my head, in part, because I'm a marginal part of the discipline anyway, and when I came, I guess, the department was actually quite compatible with my interests. I shared a lot of interests. This was also,

however, the beginning of rational choice theory. Popkin represents this sort of very, very early version of rational choice theory, and I thought that rational choice theory was an extremely narrow vision. It's essentially microeconomics as applied to political science and decision making, cost benefit analysis, and I thought it was a narrowing and stupidification of the discipline. There's always been a quantitative emphasis, and that has been replaced more recently by the idea of natural experiments, represented in my department by Donald Green, who left for Columbia, and he was very much of a Leninist on this being the only form of political science that was worth doing.

He looked down on people who actually wrote books. He thought that was a waste of time, and if you weren't doing a natural experiment, that is to say, for example, in an election sending some people literature, phoning other people and having visits to other people, in an actual election, and figuring out what their relative propensity to vote was after that, in order to show that one treatment—it's like medical experiments—one treatment resulted in a bigger impact and so on. You can do that, and they have this idea that this is a finding from the real world, that it's a brick, and you get enough of these bricks and you've got a wall of political science and hard facts about the world. I think you just have a pile of bricks, because each of these natural experiments is conducted in a particular set of circumstances, a particular election, a particular constituency, a particular time in history, and so on. I think it's nonsense, to put it mildly.

And so, the trends, the centralizing trends, the methodological fads that I've seen have all been to me a kind of medieval scholasticism. I don't believe that political science is a science. At Princeton, they called the department the "Department of Politics." I'd prefer that rather than call it the "Department of Political Science," because we're not discovering universal laws of human activity. It doesn't mean you can't be careful in terms of your comparisons and your methodology, but it means abandoning the idea that you're discovering universal laws the way Newton was discovering gravity.

04-00:11:06

Holmes:

There was, if I'm correct in this, there was a point in time which they call the "Perestroika Movement" in political science—looking at methodology, pluralism, relevance to a general audience, these kind of traits. You're usually named as an example within that kind of movement. Discuss your thoughts on that movement and your involvement.

04-00:11:35

Scott:

Sure. We don't know who Mister Perestroika or Miss Perestroika—or maybe it's a plurality. Some people think it's several people, who Perestroika was. There are people who have ideas. Some people believe it's me. I assure you, it wasn't me. I'm content to go my own way. I don't want to change. I'm not going to spend my time in the trenches trying to change the discipline. The

reason I'm associated with it is because the original manifesto that was sent out by Mister Perestroika started out by saying, "Ben Anderson and Jim Scott never read the *American Political Science Review*. What's wrong with the *American Political Science Review*?" So, kind of paid me a compliment by trashing the *American Political Science Review*, and it had quite an impact. There were Perestroika candidates run. Susanne Rudolph, who studied India, was essentially a Perestroika candidate who became head of the American Political Science Association.

And so, it did two things actually. One of the things is that it took away the review section of the *American Political Science Review* and put it in a new journal called *Perspectives on Politics*, with a new editor. This was a broader journal that was methodologically more plural, that was less constrained, that dealt with more topical issues, and it had the book reviews. Most people were not interested in the *American Political Science Review* except for the reviews of articles and the literature, and it was a good thing to take away the literature reviews and put it in this rather better and broader journal. So that was a practical achievement of the Perestroika Movement. It changed the panels. It resulted in at least a formal recognition of a larger methodological palette than we had had before, but I don't want to exaggerate. The *American Political Science Review* then became a much narrower journal.

However, if you paid dues to the American Political Science Association, which you do if you want to attend the meetings and participate in their sort of events, you get the *American Political Science Review* as part of your dues. So you're supporting it, and many of us actually thought what we should do—there are at least sixteen or seventeen journals that are, for example, *World Politics*, *American Journal of Political Science* and so on—what we should do is give people a choice of either being a member without subscribing to any journal, or having a subsidized subscription to any one or two of journals on a list of fifteen or twenty journals. Then, my guess is that most people wouldn't bother to ever even subscribe to the *American Political Science Review*, because they don't read it anyway. But it's like *Pravda*: it comes on your menu whether you like it or not, and without that kind of monopoly. Of course, the neoliberals on the left said, "Look, it's all about choice. People should have a choice of which journal they want. If you really believe in microeconomics and neoliberalism—" but this is a monopoly. This was communism.

And so that didn't happen, and by and large, I think the discipline is still very narrow. They abandoned political economy; comparative politics in my field, it's rather more broad than most of the subfields in political science; and political theory, the history of political thought—John Locke and so on—that remains a kind of separate intellectual history that has its own guidelines and own standards of excellence. But, the people who are doing quantitative political science on either quantitative election work, or these natural experiments, they believe that they are the hardcore, central, scientific part of

political science, and they still rule the discipline in general, although the Yale department is fairly catholic with a small *c*.

04-00:16:58

Holmes:

You've been named the Sterling Professor of Political Science at Yale, which is the highest honor and endowed chair that Yale gives to faculty. Discuss your experience in receiving this title.

04-00:17:15

Scott:

Well, somebody, a previous chairman, asked me if I would like to be named a Sterling Professor, and I said, "What does it mean?" and he said, "It's a title; doesn't mean anything." I said, "Do we get any more money? Can I get research funds?" and he said, "I don't think so, but it's an honor. Not everybody's a Sterling Professor." So I said, "Yes," and then I thought, well wait a minute, that's just a little name that they got out of a hat and they said, "Okay, you're a Sterling Professor." I then wrote to the provost and I said, "No, if this doesn't come with any chance for me to expand my research a little and so on, and hire a graduate student as a research assistant, I don't think I want to be a Sterling Professor." I got a letter back saying, "Oh, being a Sterling Professor comes with \$5,000 a year extra," and I think they invented that, because it was an embarrassment to have me turn down being a Sterling Professor.

So they gave me another \$5,000, and a previous provost six or seven years back, just before he left, made the \$5,000 into \$10,000, so, all Sterling Professors get \$10,000 in addition to their salary. And that goes on, as an elderly professor said, "It goes on even after you retire. You get the \$10,000 until you die." So the only thing I know, it's an honor and I'm conscious of that, and Yale doesn't make everyone a Sterling Professor. I'm particularly happy that I'm a Sterling Professor because it helps legitimate the kind of political science that I do and makes it a little more likely that other people will think that it's a kind of work that is worth doing and is honorable at least.

04-00:19:42

Holmes:

Over your career, we can see your gravitation towards anthropology. Discuss how this interest and involvement in the field of anthropology began, because you're not only the Sterling Professor of political science, but you also hold the title of professor of anthropology at Yale as well.

04-00:20:00

Scott:

As they say, "by courtesy," and I'm also in forestry and environmental studies by courtesy as well. So, at the risk of repeating myself, my interest in anthropology came from the fact that most studies of the peasantry have been anthropological, ethnographic studies of the peasantry, and by going to a Malay village and spending two years there trying to understand the village, its agriculture, its class relations, I was acting like an anthropologist. For me, as I said, the attraction of anthropology is the fact, whereas most political scientists would come into a village with either a questionnaire, or have

figured out exactly the data they want from the village, in order to fit into their theoretical schemes—it's not as if anthropologists walk in with their hands in their pockets, but they try to have as few *préjugés* as possible. They try to go in with wide eyes, and open to understanding this village in its own terms, the terms that they use. And so, as my way of putting it to political scientists, and why we should practice more ethnography, is that, if you want to know why a group of people are doing what they do, then the first step you must make is to ask them what they think they're up to. That is to say, it's not that they always tell the truth. It's not that they're not mislead, et cetera, et cetera, but the very least you must do is grapple with their self-understanding of what they think they're up to in the terms that they express it, and if you don't do that, you are practicing social science behind people's backs.

So you have to take it seriously as an account, and to not do that is not only social science behind people's back, but it's also rude. If you're going to study why a group of people do what they do—and we always ask elites what their ideology is, what their big ideas are, how they understand their history. We don't do it for mass publics, and anthropologists do it for ordinary people on the ground. They give them the kind of dignity of having a history, of having tastes, having aesthetics, having a kind of sense of ethics and so on. Although we always, when we study elites, give them the courtesy of that understanding of their behavior, we don't do that generally—political scientists certainly don't for mass publics—and that's why I like anthropology. I like its naïveté. I like its respect for the subjects that they're studying, and the fact that they pay attention to how these people understand their world.

04-00:23:22

Holmes:

In discussing as you were saying the importance of ethnographic field work, in some of your forewords you've joked that ethnographic field work is not just going into a village and observing, but often having to work side by side with that community as well. For example, in Malaysia, you not only worked out in the fields with much of that community, but you also built latrines, if I'm recalling correctly.

04-00:23:56

Scott:

I would not exaggerate the amount of work I did in the village. I did some threshing, and I did some threshing actually in an opportunistic way, you could say, because there were a number of poor people that I hadn't really talked with and hadn't gotten to know. And so I threshed with them and the way in which threshing worked in this village is that you were paid by how many gunnysacks of threshed rice you threshed after it was filled. You, always in a team of two, threshed into a big barrel, and then that was put in gunnysacks, and you were paid, each, based on half of the number of filled gunnysacks. What I would do is to thresh with a poor person with whom I wanted to ingratiate myself, and then I would not collect my share of the threshing wages. They were threshing much better than I was anyway, but I just didn't collect my wage. It went to them instead.

And so they got the whole thing, and it was a way of being useful, getting to know them, getting to know what threshing is, which is really hard work. I did this on three or four days. I helped people build a latrine, but these people were a lot cleverer than I was, and you could say that in many of these activities, I was in their way more than I was helping them. I had a lot of respect for the number of things these people could actually do in the world, whether it was laying brick, building a latrine, with a relatively few kind of tools, actually. There was no electricity in the village, there were no electric drills, so everything was kind of done with old-style hand tools, and I wasn't completely helpless because I'm moderately handy myself, but not nearly as handy as most of these people.

04-00:26:13

Holmes:

During your time at Yale, if one has been around the Program for a couple years, they'll hear stories of your anarchist streak on campus. Are there some memorable stories of poking and challenging the ivory tower that stand out during your time?

04-00:26:44

Scott:

Oh, there's sophomoric things that I did. So, I have somewhere, although I noticed five or six years ago when I ran across it that the picture had faded. But anyway, on an April Fool's Day, Doug Rae and I had a joking relationship, and I did the sophomoric thing of spending an hour or two making balls of newspaper, and filling his office with them, so that you opened the door and you had a solid wall of balled-up newspaper that fell out on him. I don't know why I did that, but I did that for an April Fool's joke. And he then went out to Latella, who was the garbage collector in New Haven who raised pigs on the garbage, and bought a tiny little piglet and put it in my office. We raised that piglet until she was 300 pounds, [laughs] and butchered it, so I had the last laugh. Name was Ernestine. Then, in return for that, the next week or so, I had a goat, and I brought my goat in, got it up in the second floor of now-demolished Brewster Hall, on top of Doug Rae's desk, and called the *Yale Daily News* and had them photograph me feeding pages of his latest book to the goat, and they took the picture of this. And so that was not challenging Yale, but it was just an example of how crazy I can get, and Doug Rae was sporting in the same way.

I think the only thing I did that was mildly—I got arrested, actually. I was a supporter of the graduate student organizing, so twenty years ago or so there, we all stepped into Wall Street to be arrested as part of civil disobedience. It was all arranged in advance. It was no big deal, and there were actually buses waiting to take us to the police station in order to be booked for disturbing the peace, or blocking a public way, or whatever exactly it was. It was a proud moment for me as I got to sit next to Bayard Rustin on the way to the police station to be booked. Rustin, who helped organize the March on Washington, and who was a hero of mine anyway, he had gotten an honorary degree from Yale the year before, and he came up to protest with the graduate students. I

remember him saying, "I have finally found a good use for an honorary degree." And so it was nice that someone Yale had given an honorary degree came back to get arrested in a protest against Yale. I was delighted at Rustin's gesture at that particular moment, although the civil disobedience was so routine and decorous, the arrest so formulaic, that nobody ever was prosecuted.

The only other thing I think I did that was mildly parotic, I guess you would say, is the chapter that appears in *Two Cheers for Anarchism* on this citation, Social Science Citation Index and its idiocies. There were a series of lectures and it came out as a book—I'm not even sure I have a copy of it—but Yale wanted a number of people to give lectures for the 300th anniversary of Yale, and there were about fifteen of us asked to lecture. They asked me to lecture, and most of them are reminiscences and kind of very praiseful of Yale, and I decided to make fun of the social sciences and the Citation Index rather than just writing a hymn of praise to Yale. Yale has enough hymns of praise. It doesn't need another hymn of praise. It needs to be—what do they say in Australia? They "take the Mickey out" of somebody. It's, they need to be brought down a peg and ironized, or something like that.

04-00:31:33

Holmes:

Well I wanted to discuss the development of Agrarian Studies at Yale, and maybe a good place to start is actually with your own interest in agriculture. In some respects, you seem to practice what you write, in one form or another, or at least practice what could be discussed at times there at the Agrarian Studies Program. Yet it's also a title, if we look at your later books, that often joins Sterling Professor of Political Science at the end of that short bio, which it seems you prefer just as much.

04-00:32:14

Scott:

"A mediocre farmer" or "sheep breeder" or something, right, yeah. So, that is to say, my interest in agriculture. As I mentioned much earlier, I did stoop labor as an early teenager for several summers in agriculture in New Jersey. My part of New Jersey was very agricultural, and so, it's not as if I hadn't been around farms. My mother grew up on a farm, but I had no deep interest in agriculture and cultivation and planting, honestly. My interest in agriculture grew, I think, as a result of my interest in the peasantry, as a result of my two years in this Malay village. And then, when we came from Wisconsin, we decided—my wife Louise and I—that we either wanted to live in the city or all the way in the country, but not in between, not in the suburbs. So, I actually looked for a place by myself. Louise, as we did in Wisconsin as well, let me find a place. She left that up to me, and although she had heard things about the school system in Durham, that it had open classroom, in any case, we essentially decided to live in the country. We had spent the summers at this cabin in Pennsylvania, a fishing cabin and so on, without electricity for the most part. And so, we were both perfectly happy to be in the country, out in the woods ourselves.

After I got here, I don't know why, but I bought a goat. We lived across the street, and just had maybe an acre, acre and a half, and I bought a goat and kept some chickens. So I've been interested in animal husbandry and livestock more than I have been in planting crops and cultivating the land and using a plow and so on. We loved this farm across the road from us. It came up for sale in 1977 a year before we went to Malaysia for two years, but we didn't have the money and it went to another buyer. But the two brothers selling it had a falling out about who would get most of the proceeds and the deal fell through. When we got back from Malaysia, it turned out it was possible to buy it far more cheaply. And so, we put all of our money together and bought it, and then little by little, I got a couple of sheep and three sheep, and I decided, I had a big barn up there, why don't I raise some sheep? And I don't know why it was sheep; that is, I thought cows would be too big for me. Sheep looked like I could handle them, and one thing led to another and I learned to shear, and I finally ended up, for the better part of twenty years, I had twenty-five ewes, which meant that they were having lambs every year. Oh, half of them would have twins, half of them had singletons, so I would have something like thirty-six lambs. So thirty-six lambs plus twenty-five, we're up to sixty. I have sixty sheep, and so that's a lot of work, and if you have sixty kids, one of them always has a sniffly nose, or the flu, so there was always kind of problems during lambing.

So I became really interested. I threw myself in it not knowing a whole hell of a lot, and gradually learned as I did it. Probably not the best thing for the sheep, because I made some mistakes along the way, but then I became a fairly competent sheep shearer. I've done some sheep shearing in Australia actually, with friends, and delivered lambs and managed breeding. And so, to finish my sheep breeding, the thing that I liked least about raising sheep is that at the beginning, I had, at the advice of people that I took that was a mistake, I had a flock of a breed of Finn Dorsets, they were called, because they had twins and triplets and they sometimes bred twice a year. So, it was to maximize your lamb crop. I did maximize my lamb crop but I had a lot of dead lambs too, and I hated burying dead lambs. That was the sort of saddest thing about being a sheep breeder, and so I gradually moved to a breed of sheep, Montadales, that were terrific mothers and they lost very few of their lambs, and the lambs were vigorous, and up and nursing. Once a lamb gets its first meal from mom, it's fine, by and large.

And so, in my last three years, I only lost a single lamb. That was my, I thought, my biggest achievement, and I sold lamb to Yale faculty, after butchered and packaged and so on, every year. My big market was to sell to the Greeks and Italians at Easter. So, both the Italians and the Greek Orthodox have this tradition of having a lamb for Easter, and so that's the big market in New England anyway, for lambs, and so, I sold most of my lambs to people who were going to take them home and butcher them, or they butchered them here, and then took the meat home. And I'm sitting, by the way, on the fleece

of one of the lambs that was butchered here or there, and you are too, on a dark—I had a couple of prizewinning sheep for their dark wool.

04-00:38:47

Holmes:

Yes, it's very nice. For most, their professional life is work enough, and as you were just saying, farming and sheep breeding was a lot of hard work. What was it about sheep breeding and having a farm that kept your interest, and did it intermesh, a bit, with your scholarly work?

04-00:39:15

Scott:

So, this may be the difference of why I'm not, let's say, plowing a field, and instead, I'm raising sheep. There—if you've ever seen it—there is nothing more astounding than a little baby lamb gamboling, kicking up its back legs for sheer joy of being alive, and so, the baby lambs were so extraordinary. I found raising baby lambs to be, even though I was selling them off often to the Greeks and Italians at Easter, I found the miracle of baby lambs to be quite an extraordinary thing, and they're completely beautiful. And yeah, it took a lot of time, but the fact is, I guess, people have asked me before, "How did you manage to do the scholarship and also raise sheep?" and actually, the farm took about two weeks of solid work for fencing, for haying, and for shearing, so I sacrificed maybe two weeks for shear work, and for the rest of the year, basically, it was maybe a half hour in the morning and a half hour in the evening, and I would have pissed away that time with the *New York Times*, or with a guitar. I can't do political science twenty-four hours a day anyway, and so I would have found some other outlet.

So I don't think it took any time away from my scholarship at all, and it actually taught me a few things about farming and agriculture, and so on, little things like—I could go on forever about this, but I'll just tell one. So, I was reminded of this by a friend who was gardening, and he was weeding his peas with a hoe, and he got to the end of a long row and said he leaned on his hoe and said to himself, "What a long row to hoe," and he realized he was actually using this expression where it really belonged, because he'd just hoed a row of peas. Well, so there're all these things like, "the grass is greener on the other side of the fence." If the sheep are grazing in a pasture and they've grazed down the grass, you'll find them on their knees with their head through the fence because the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. And when we butchered this pig, and I was bringing it home, I was "bringing home the bacon," and then the first thing we had was a loin roast, and we were "eating high off the hog." All right, and so all of these, you can't get very far in English without some expression that actually has a literal meaning to farmers themselves. And so, it taught me things like that, maybe not very important, but interesting to me anyway.

04-00:42:43

Holmes:

Well, in building the Program in Agrarian Studies, I'd like to ask about the field of agrarian studies to start. It's a field that you've made a number of

contributions to over the decades. Maybe discuss your thoughts and observations on the development of the field of agrarian studies.

04-00:43:08

Scott:

You could argue that agrarian studies doesn't exist as a field, at all: that there are people who study peasants; there are people who will study land tenure; there are people who study agrarian revolts; there are people who study the agricultural economy; there are departments of rural sociology in some places still. And there are—I think we have been—actually, the proudest thing you could say about Agrarian Studies is that we've been copied about six or seven or eight places who have developed the same kind of format. Sometimes it has more of an ecological focus; sometimes it has a focus on soils, and so on. So we've been actually a kind of inspiration to other places around the world that have programs that are a little like this, and so, I don't think that agrarian studies, as a field, we don't give to give degrees. That is to say, we're just a program. As you know better than anyone, we're just the colloquium, and the graduate course, and the postdocs, and so you can't get a degree in agrarian studies at Yale or anywhere as near as I can tell, although you can be a historian, a sociologist, a political scientist, or an anthropologist who's interested deeply in peasants and agriculture, and I guess that's agrarian studies.

04-00:44:38

Holmes:

Well you started the seminar in the spring of 1990, if I have it correctly, the Seminar in Agrarian Societies. Is that the official name?

04-00:44:52

Scott:

The seminar began before we were ever funded, and it was either in '90 or '91. I think I was inclined to call it "A Program in Peasant Studies," because then we were thinking in terms of the peasantry, and other people said, "No, that doesn't make any sense because if you're going to do Europe and the US, they don't have peasants anymore; they're farmers; and so it shouldn't be peasants." And that's how we came up with the word "agrarian," which is better because "peasants" names a kind of class of people, and we're interested actually in rural life in general, so that you could not be interested in the people but interested in the crops, in the soils, and so on. And so I think the word "agrarian" is useful and it was a good choice that we made. But the program grew out of this seminar, and then this guy who decided for some reason to tell me that, if we wanted to do something, he'd be interested in helping fund it, and that's how it grew.

04-00:46:18

Holmes:

Well, discuss whose idea was it to start the seminar, because this was also team taught, I think, in the beginning, just as it is now.

04-00:46:25

Scott:

Yes, I think. Well, I was part of a reading group with Bill Kelly and Helen Siu, both in anthropology, and I forget who else—and Bob Harms in history.

I'm trying to remember who taught that first seminar, and for the life of me, I can't be sure, but there were three of us, and we decided we'd like to teach a course on history, anthropology, and politics of the peasantry.

04-00:47:14

Holmes: Talking to some of the alumni of that course, which included none other than Paul Sabin, in the history department, was in the first class—

04-00:47:26

Scott: Wow.

04-00:47:27

Holmes: Louis Warren was also in that first class—

04-00:47:32

Scott: Oh my God, wow; so distinguished.

04-00:47:36

Holmes: Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan] was also in that class. What do you recall of the reception of that seminar, by the students?

04-00:47:48

Scott: Oh, that's why we're a program. That is to say, I think, when we started it— Shivi has these numbers more accurately than I do, but I'm close. It was a tricky business, because three of us were teaching it, and I imagined we'd have maybe a dozen people, and I was perfectly cool with that, but I thought Yale would not be happy with that; it would seem like a scam to them. And so twelve people in an intensive course would have been quite wonderful, pedagogically, I think, but over fifty people turned up, from all these different disciplines, and they couldn't have known about the course because it hadn't been taught before. It's not as if that we had a big reputation, and it's not as if any of us were really known very well either, so, the idea that fifty-two people turned up had not so much to do with us, but it had to do with the topic in general and the idea of people who felt orphaned by their department that was not offering them a course on this theme. And so, it seemed to me to be an indication that there was an unfed appetite out there for certain kinds of work and courses, and we did it well enough anyway so that people continued to come in large numbers.

04-00:49:32

Holmes: And, from this seminar, as you mentioned, the Program of Agrarian Studies was started, which formally began in the fall of 1991.

04-00:49:46

Scott: I'll take your word for it.

04-00:49:46

Holmes: All right. [laughter] And this not only included the seminar, but also a weekly colloquium, a program with funding for resident postdocs that would be affiliated with the program, as well as later graduate student support, through

grants and research money. Discuss the experience of building this program—you were talking about the reception of the seminar, but what about the idea of the colloquium itself.

04-00:50:22

Scott:

So we knew that we wanted to have people come in and give talks. We wanted, in a sense, to expose people interested in this theme to the best work all over the country. Actually, I never wanted to run a program or start a program. I took up this invitation in a selfish way with the idea that I could perhaps give myself the seminar I've always wanted to have by bringing in the people I wanted to listen to. And so half of these colloquium givers, I had a big hand in saying, "I want to hear what this person has to say. I want to meet this person. I want to get to know this person's work." And of course, other people had a big hand in choosing the people, so we all invited people whose work we found interesting, to come.

Here's an interesting thing and useful for people who are going to start programs. So, the Davis Center at Princeton was a success and I had given a talk there, and Norman Stone, the historian, was running it then. Afterwards, it was taken over by Natalie Davis. The Davis Center run by Natalie Davis, rather odd. But anyway, so before I started the Agrarian Studies Program, before our first year, I went down to Princeton. I made an appointment with Norman Stone and spent a morning with him and went to the Davis Center seminar, and I said, "Do you have any tricks about a successful program, a successful series?" and he said one thing that actually is really important. It'll sound trivial, but it's really important, and that is he said, "I'll tell you one thing: that whatever you do, make sure that after the intellectual event, there is a social event, immediately after," the idea being that, at that social event, people who heard someone make an interesting comment, got to hear some interesting thing from someone in another discipline, can sit down with them and talk and get to know them, sort of. That is to say, if it's just the intellectual event and people scatter, you don't create all of these linkages between disciplines. And so we have a free lunch after every agrarian [studies] colloquium with the idea that this is the way in which people can make these connections.

04-00:52:54

Holmes:

I want to hear more on the colloquium in a minute, but I also wanted to take the chance to ask: There was a lot of partners, faculty partners, in this enterprise; who were some of the earliest supporters who helped you kind of craft this program, and supported its operation, and participated even as audience members in the colloquium?

04-00:53:26

Scott:

I would like to go back and look at the list of people who were coming, but the faculty people who were most involved were, as I said at the beginning, Bill Kelly, who works on Japanese peasants; Helen Siu, who worked on Chinese peasants; Bob Harms who worked on African cultivators and wrote

several environmental classics, I think, of African history; a couple of people from economics whose names escape me; someone who did a history of theories of value who didn't get tenure; Gerald Jaynes who's in economics, interested in agriculture; oh, a recently deceased economist, Bob Evenson in economics, who ran the Economic Growth Center; Gustav Ranis, who would come occasionally, who was a theorist of economic growth.

Recall that I had a kind of quasi-economics training myself, so I was interested in these people coming along. Generally, the faculty who were there routinely were the people who were teaching the seminar and who had a hand in choosing the people who were coming to give talks, and then the largest portion of people who came to attend the colloquia were graduate students from one discipline or another. What we tried to do, which I think is why it's good to be called "agrarian studies," is that we had people who people would not otherwise—a narrow version of peasant studies would not have given us, for example, Alice Waters, who came to talk about sort of diet and *The Edible Schoolyard*; would not have given us Annie Proulx, who came to talk about landscape in American fiction; we wouldn't have had Wes Jackson from The Land Institute talking about the history of crop breeding; we would not have had people talking about Roman latifundia; we would not have had people talking about pastoral poetry in Song Dynasty, China.

So we had all kinds of things that would be not on your standard mother's list of books on peasants and speakers on the peasants, and so the idea was not only to represent the kinds of knowledge that could be brought to bear on the study of agricultural and rural life from many, many, many different disciplines including the humanities, medicine, sociology, history, and so on, and so, to create genuinely a kind of intellectual practice. So, I'll stop. This is a sort of sermon I give actually, almost, which is, you know how the health food people say, "You are what you eat"? You are what you read, and if we can encourage students to read things broadly in several disciplines bearing on their interests, and if we can force them, as we do, more or less, or we try to 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 even if you never collaborate with another person. So, you are what you read and you are who your intellectual companions are, and if we can change that—we can't change who gives you promotion, who hires you, unfortunately—but if we can change that, we can at least make a step toward real interdisciplinary work.

04-00:58:17

Holmes:

Those who have sat in the room of Agrarian Studies at the colloquium throughout the years, the structure and format of the colloquium is something that usually sets it apart, outside of the presenter and the audience, as you were just noting. Maybe discuss this format of how the colloquium runs, and where did you get the idea of running it like that?

04-00:58:47

Scott: You mean especially the gagging of the—

04-00:58:49

Holmes: Yes.

04-00:58:50

Scott: We got that from the women's studies program at Wisconsin. Somebody was telling me how the women's studies program organized their activity, and I don't think anybody else—there are other people who now do that, but they're copying us, and we copied the women's studies program at Wisconsin, but I loved the idea, and still do. You've experienced it a lot, but I think it doesn't always work. Sometimes it fails, but if you shut up the writer of the paper, and you have a discussion of their work for forty-five minutes or more, generally two or three kind of themes get to be voiced several times in the comments and so on, and then you have a more cohesive, coherent, interesting discussion than you do if it's just the back and forth between the paper writer and a questioner.

And so, that is to say, you could argue—some people have—that, "Just send us the paper. We don't give a shit about you coming by. You're the grain of sand that creates the pearl in our oyster, the source of irritation that will make the pearl, and we don't need you at all. You're just an excuse for us to think with you, and to sort of riff on whatever you've given us." That's sort of fairly cynical because these people often contribute a lot to the discussion, but the idea is that we're there to create intellectual community, and the colloquium givers are, in a sense, the kind of raw material that comes at one end of it.

04-01:00:41

Holmes: You mentioned a little bit about the early selection process for the weekly presenters, over the years, did this become more systematic in a sense, more people involved, or did it largely still rest in that general format, a rubric if you will, of, "I read some interesting work by these scholars, and I want them to come by and have a discussion"?

04-01:01:11

Scott: So, it became a little more systematic, I think. When we started, of course, there wasn't an Agrarian Studies Program, so there was, if you like, there was a silo full of people that, any one of which, we would have been happy to hear and consider their work, and so we had a kind of cornucopia. We couldn't miss, if you like, all the greats, and we had all the greats come through, like Teodor Shanin and so on. We would write around to all the faculty and say, "Who should we have next year? Is there anybody whose work you've run across that you find interesting? Write us, give us two or three sentences about this person's work and why they'd be interesting to have, and we'll take it from there." I, every year, filled a file folder with clippings from the newspapers, from magazines, from little bibliographies that I'd run across that I thought, well that might be interesting; let's look into that. And so I would have at least

fifty or sixty different sort of notations for people whom we might invite, and then the other faculty members who were involved.

And the other thing we do, which limits our flexibility, but actually is on balance advantageous, and that we make these invitations in December and January for the next academic year, so, under the theory that the early bird gets the worm. Actually, most people don't have any plans for next September in the December before that time, so, most of the people who we want, we get. And so, by doing that early, we fill up our colloquium for the whole year. So, we're inviting people in December for June a year and a half, or May a year and a half away, and it means that we kind of miss some last minute—"X is coming through; could he give, or she give, a seminar?" and we can't do that unless we find another venue for them to give their talk. But, actually, there's like a selection process. It's not formalized, but now, I think, it casts a fairly wide net.

04-01:04:11
Holmes:

One of the aspects that's also interesting and unique about the Agrarian Studies colloquium is that it not only includes scholars, but that at least one of the presenters or more out of the year are actual farmers, practitioners, that you always felt was important to bring in. Discuss that experience of bringing real farmers, well, into a room of [laughs] Yale intellectuals, if you will.

04-01:04:40
Scott:

Well, we have some people who don't want to come, who are either intimidated or even contemptuous of all these pinheads, and so, it's not as if we haven't had several farmers that don't want to come. I realize we don't have a farmer coming this year, but we've almost always had a farmer every year, and they're usually farmers with a kind of special interesting aspect. We had this guy, Chip Planck, who's run a sort of big market garden outside of D.C., and who's kind of a philosopher himself. We have Wes Jackson, whom I mentioned, who's a kind of plant breeder in Salina, Kansas, and he's a sort of like a big-time farmer in terms of trying to sort of create new breeds of perennial wheat. We had the person who does the bread lab who's growing different kinds of ancient wheats and oats and ryes and making new breads for them, and we've had a couple of California—Masumoto, "Mas" Masumoto and Percy Schmeiser, the Canadian farmer who sued Monsanto in court for contaminating his fields. I think those things are important, and as you know, some of these people, they're farmers but they've also written something interesting, an article, and so on, and you remind me that we're in danger of getting out of the habit of having farmers regularly. I think we had a farmer last year but not this year.

04-01:06:22
Holmes:

I wanted to ask, are there memorable presenters? There's probably too many to even mention, but are there certain presenters or events that you recall from the colloquium over the years?

04-01:06:38

Scott:

Sure. We've had some famous people like Teodor Shanin, people who most people who know Agrarian Studies have never met and want desperately to meet and who are kind of heroes intellectually. Then we've had people on purpose, who are extremely controversial. And so we had people from Monsanto who came to sort of argue on behalf of their GMOs [genetically modified organisms] and so on, and then we had someone from the Union of Concerned Scientists debating against that, in two separate sessions.

We had one that I remember. This is a guy who's passed away as well. It was a guy named Michael Cernea, and he is, in the World Bank context, he's a good guy, in the sense that, I don't know if you're familiar with it, but the Indian government planned to have the Narmada Dam built, and they had World Bank funding, and there were riots and demonstrations, and the World Bank people kind of got stoned by aboriginal peoples living there, and had to kind of run away. It was a big scandal. The World Bank decided not to fund the dam. India went ahead and built it anyway. One thing led to another, and there was a World Commission on Dams which set out a kind of series of guidelines: "if you're going to have a dam, that has to pass these tests," blah, blah, blah, blah. And one of the things about all these dams, of course, is that they involve the dispossession of people whose lands are going to be flooded, and so the question is: How should they be taken care of? How should their livelihoods be protected? Should they be given land, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera? How should they be transported and so on?

And so Michael Cernea wrote the World Bank handbook on the ethical treatment of people who are being forcibly moved because of the existence of a dam. Well, most of the people in our crowd would not like people to ever be forcibly relocated for a dam in the first place, and although he was a good guy in the World Bank context, somebody accused him of the moral equivalent of tidying up the boxcars on the way to Auschwitz, so that they were more attractive and cleaner, but they were still taking these people to Auschwitz and to their death. It ended up in screaming and yelling and shouting, and he felt as if we had brought him in and insulted and humiliated him. So it was a difficult moment, but I have the feeling that it was a good experience for him. He survived it, and I bet he became a better World Bank official by knowing the contempt which this kind of work was held in, by most people anyway.

04-01:10:30

Holmes:

I wanted to ask, to run a program like this, there is, well, there's a governance operation, I guess we want to say; there's a structure to it if you will. You always served as director of the program, is that correct?

04-01:10:48

Scott:

Except when I was away.

04-01:10:49

Holmes:

Okay. And then now, you're a co-director with Shivi. When did Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan] start with the program as co-director?

04-01:11:02

Scott:

I started teaching with Shivi—I'm trying to remember when. Shivi, he's an ex-Indian administrative service officer, and so, he's unbelievably competent as a bureaucratic mover and shaker and administrator, and so, I noticed that he was doing a lot of the kind of work that I probably should have been doing for the class and for the program, and so, I said, "You should be co-director," and he was cool with that, and he's taken over more of that.

Part of the problem: When we started, we had the support of the provost, we had a full-time administrator who I brought over from Southeast Asia Studies, Kay Mansfield, and she was extremely competent, and she was like den mother for the research fellows who came in every year. So she, over and above her official duties, she became an important sort of focus and sort of maternal center of the program, and meant a lot to people. And so she would help them figure out arrangements for daycare, where they might find an apartment.

So she was helpful well above and beyond her formal duties, and we were, I forget under what provost. Oh, I know what happened. When I was away in—I'm trying to figure what year it was. In any case, when I was away for a year, in around 2000, 2005 or something, there was an earlier fiscal crisis at Yale during which time they wanted people to retire, get them off the payroll, and were giving them a kind of little golden parachute. Kay and I had always joked that we would leave hand in hand together out the front door. Neither of us would leave without the other, because—

04-01:13:55

Holmes:

Wasn't she your assistant before working for Agrarian Studies?

04-01:14:00

Scott:

Yeah, she was the secretary of the program, the Southeast Asian Program which I was chairman of then, and so, I persuaded her to move over. So she decided, when I was away—I was kind of pissed at the time—she decided to take the golden parachute. I was not reachable, I guess, or something like that, and so I just learned that she was going to retire at the end of the year, and then I think we had sort of three, quarter-time fill-ins for the next two or three years, that didn't work very satisfactorily, people who had other obligations and so on. Then, one provost, or maybe it was Ben Polak, decided to take away our administrative assistant altogether, and so we had to have a graduate student. I was paying the graduate student out of my own research funds, actually. Now that we have money from MacMillan, we're able to have at least a kind of full-time graduate that is ten hours a week or so of a graduate assistant who is running, well, what you did, right? I don't know how many hours a week you were paid for, but that's the deal.

04-01:15:25

Holmes: Yes, well in regards to how that structure also changed, was that the graduate student actually became the semi-program coordinator—

04-01:15:38

Scott: That meant driving and picking up people, et cetera, blah, blah, blah, yeah, a lot of work.

04-01:15:43

Holmes: And, that's what I was. Well, happy to report that I was the first program coordinator my last year.

04-01:15:51

Scott: Was that right? You were the first one?

04-01:15:52

Holmes: I was the first one, yeah.

04-01:15:53

Scott: Okay, cool. Which is the year?

04-01:15:55

Holmes: Which would have been 2012, 2013, after Kay left. Speaking though of graduate assistant, because even then, Kay would have an assistant that worked maybe about five hours a week. If I have this correct, Shivi was the first graduate student for that program?

04-01:16:20

Scott: Yes, but Shivi was never a research fellow. He went and taught in Washington, University of Washington in Seattle, and then came back. Exactly when Shivi came back, I don't know. He's been around for a long time now, but Shivi, at the beginning, Shivi was less involved in Agrarian Studies, although he'd come to a lot of the activities and was an active participant. Shivi was involved in running the South Asia program, and ended up raising something like \$60 million for them, and was treated very shabbily by the university in terms of allowing him to do the things he wanted to do with the program for which he'd raised so much money.

04-01:17:14

Holmes: I wanted to ask a little bit about the growth of the colloquium. I believe this year, the program's been around for at least twenty-seven years, so it's approaching three decades. When we look at other academic programs, particularly over your career, you've probably seen a number of centers or programs come and go, for the Program in Agrarian Studies to reach almost three decades is a milestone for many academic programs, especially with not massive endowments or corporate endowments.

04-01:17:56

Scott: Or any endowments.

04-01:17:57

Holmes:

Yeah. What are your thoughts on the success of this program?

04-01:18:05

Scott:

Well, we had, as I said, a provost who was an anthropologist and who valued what we were doing, and she, in a sense, got us started as being supported by general funds of Yale University that the provost controlled. I'm trying to remember the year, and we've had several, as I've described them, near-death experiences, but there was a committee set up that was explicitly to save money. Who's this guy? [Jim] Levinsohn, who runs the global studies program, he was part of it. [Peter] Salovey was on the committee; he was not yet president of Yale, and the objective of this was to evaluate a whole series of programs in order to get rid of as many as possible in order to save money, and, I understand that there are lots of programs that deserve to die. [laughs] It's not as if they're all entitled to immortality. Some of them have their periods and so on, and we were on the list of programs to be evaluated, and we got fabulous evaluations. We did extremely well. And so, we were on the list of, "Okay, we're not going to shoot Agrarian Studies, but we're going to reduce their budget." They took one of the postdocs away from us, or maybe two of the postdocs. We've gotten one back. So, they decided, "Okay, we're not going to take you to the wall and shoot you altogether, but we're going to take off little fingers and toes."

And so, that was a near death experience, and we managed to get through that, and then Ben Polak wanted to take more money away from us, and did, actually. He doesn't know anything about Agrarian Studies and wasn't even willing to listen to what it did and do his due diligence in terms of the faculty and students and how they liked it. I've thought, at some of these near-death experiences, it has occurred to me that I might rabble rouse, get alumni, graduate students, and so on to make trouble, make a petition, have a faculty petition, but it's never quite come to that, thank God, because that would have taken a lot of my time, and also, put me on some people's blacklist in the administration. And so we managed to come through, and I think we've come through because there are enough people who recognize what we do as important. How long it continues into the future—but I think, to be self-satisfied about it, I guess, I think in the large scope of things, it's one of the more successful interdisciplinary programs anywhere, and so it's kind of interesting, and that has to do with people's interest in rural life from all different disciplines, and the fact that it's been an exciting, intellectual place.

I'm going to divert a little here because I think it's an important story. So I had a student who was a Southeast Asianist, Tim Pachirat, whom you know about, and he was going to study the poor people in Thailand since he's half Thai, and he was my student as a Southeast Asianist. He was also involved in the Agrarian Studies Program, and he did political theory, and he got this idea that he'd like to understand what it did to people to kill sentient beings every day all day for a living. And so he got this idea that he'd like to work in a

slaughterhouse, and understand what it did to people to kill animals all day long. Part of his inspiration was an international conference Agrarian Studies held on the 8,000-year history of the chicken as a domesticated species.

He was a political scientist, and as you can imagine, nobody in political science thought this was a dissertation. They thought, this is a career-ending move, it's stupid, and he decided, "oh well." He was a very headstrong guy in the best possible sense of the word, and he decided, "well I'm going to do this because it seems important to do," and he learned Spanish, and ended up working for a year and a half or so in a slaughterhouse in Omaha including time on the kill floor. He did an ethnography, and now, not only did he not ruin his career, but the book became a kind of bestseller of a book—he became, I think, important in the discipline as making the case for ethnographies, in a theoretical way, and he showed that a kind of work like this that brings together all these different disciplines and is really ethnographic can be extremely powerful and important. And so, he's now interested in killing at a distance from drones and B-52s and so on, and nothing is more political than that, if you like.

I think of people who took a kind of leap into the thin air for their dissertation—even though it's looked to be not smart for their disciplinary career—and they landed on their feet. I was made fun of by lots of colleagues when I was going to go work in a Malay village for a couple of years, and that they thought this was stupid. I'm glad I did it, and I understand that life is harder for graduate students these days in terms of getting their first job, so I'm sympathetic to how they might want to pay attention to what the discipline expects of them. But this is a fairly recent example of someone who took a big risk for something important, and it turned out good for him, and I wish there were more people in political science who were willing to do daring things like this.

04-01:25:12

Holmes:

If we think of the success of the colloquium and its impact, as you mentioned with Tim, people have always pointed to the community that is fostered within that room of Agrarian Studies. When we think of the key to the program's success, we look at a variety of areas, and community, it's such an important role. I'd like to hear your thoughts on this. There's no recipe to success about building the community, outside of maybe the lunch, the discussion, like-minded scholars, interesting things. What are your thoughts about the Agrarian Studies community?

04-01:26:01

Scott:

Yeah, no, actually, it's a really perceptive question. By and large, it's worked well. I guess the most important part, and maybe I've said this before, is that I think most of the academy, the sort of ordinary disciplines and classes and so on, is treating graduate students as brains floating in formaldehyde, that they're people who don't have any other needs aside from electric impulses to

the brain of one kind or another. The fact is, they have needs of friendship, camaraderie, community, and so on. So, the kind of graduate student pizza evenings that Shivi actually has kind of organized, bringing people together, the lunches—I mean, I wouldn't have a dinner out here unless I thought that was important for creating a sense of community as well.

And so, somehow, there are a million ways of doing that, and I remember, it's the insight that Norman Stone had. It's an insight that Alice Waters had when the Sustainable Food Project was beginning and they were doing that sort of little farm up on Edwards Street, and Alice Waters said, "Whatever you do, make sure you build in an oven where you can cook some food or pizza and so on, and that you end each day with a kind of half hour of sitting down over food and talking." That's, in a sense, the insight of slow food; that's how community is built, by sharing a meal together, and that is, at some level, so agrarian, after all, that it seems to me to be particularly important for the Agrarian Studies Program.

04-01:28:16

Holmes:

Another part of this community, as we've mentioned before, is the postdoc and research fellows. When the program started, was the postdoc and the fellows program a part of the overall Agrarian Studies Program? Meaning when you first got the funding, was it also the idea to have fellows here, and what role did you envision them playing?

04-01:29:08

Scott:

My memory is maybe not so good. So, I would like to think that the postdocs were built in to the program from the beginning with the idea that it would be nice to have a competition and invite people, because I always believe in this, you also get to see the people who might actually—there are several who were postdocs who came to be hired as members of the Yale faculty and became colleagues. So, if you want to promote Agrarian Studies, then to have these postdocs come through, every once in a while, one of them is going to actually be so attractive to a department that, or that either later on, they apply for a job. So, I think it's an extremely important thing to do.

Did I think of it at the beginning? I hope so and I think so, but it's possible that somebody at the Rockefeller or Ford Foundation said, "Well why don't you have some postdocs?" and to which I would have immediately said, "Yes," if I hadn't thought of it already. But that's important, and actually, if you go through that list of a hundred, it's pretty much a who's who of all the people working on agrarian issues all over the country, and in Europe as well. And if you add to that the people who have come through the colloquium route just to give a talk, it's quite an impressive list.

04-01:31:00

Holmes:

The graduate students have also played a very significant role in that community, and when we think of the importance of not only being able to attract students and faculty to a topic, but every six years or so, you have a

new rotation of graduate students that still find the seminar and the colloquium important, that's rare and amazing. Talk about how you've seen the graduate students respond to the program, and the program's support of graduate students in regards to funding and other related events.

04-01:31:48

Scott:

I expect that our actual funding has been a pretty minor part of graduate students' funding in general. We've been able to be helpful at the margin, but I think the way the MacMillan program supports work abroad, for example, is probably a lot more significant. So, I don't think that our contribution is terribly massive in terms of actual, financial support. I have the feeling that our product—and how do you measure that? That is to say, our product is graduate students, and our product is hopefully dissertations that are at a different dissertation because of the Agrarian Studies Program than they would have been if the Agrarian Studies Program didn't exist. And so without exaggerating it, it seems to me that the people who come to that seminar and who come to colloquium to get to know people outside their discipline—and you can answer this yourself, after all—the question is, to what degree is their dissertation more interdisciplinary, richer, different, better, in some ways, by having had this intellectual encounter of reading this material, and so on?

And so, it's one of those things. When you think of a quantitative political science, I could not show you a quantitative measure for the degree to which dissertations were made better, enriched, more interdisciplinary, than they would have been without Agrarian Studies. But I think if we have any product at all, that's the product, and it's not measurable, although I suppose you could get all those people in the same room and they could, at least, testify as to whether or not it made any difference. I don't know.

04-01:34:05

Holmes:

Over the years, the program has also seen areas of growth in events that it sponsors, namely conferences. What are some of the most memorable conferences that the program has put on there at Yale over its nearly three decades?

04-01:34:29

Scott:

I don't think you were here. Did we do the history of shit?

04-01:34:32

Holmes:

No. [laughter]

04-01:34:35

Scott:

So, we had a student who was interested in manure, and including human manure, night soil in China; that was the sort of impromptu thing. We invited five or six people, and we had a little conference on the history of shit, an actually extremely important topic, as you can imagine, if done right. We had a tenth anniversary thing that was a sort of big deal. Well, this conference on wood which grew out of that. I'm trying to remember. Oh, we had sort of

agricultural commerce. One would have to go back. So many of these things are either small conferences that somebody who was a postdoc was interested in and we provided the money for them to bring five or six people in to have a small conference, or, it was someone who wanted to do a bigger conference, so for example, the history of the pig.

The history of the pig, we did that two years ago, three years ago, and Gabe Rosenberg was an agrarian fellow, and he organized that. We did the history of the chicken, which is probably the most important of those kinds of conferences. People who were there still regard it as a famous thing, and it was a much bigger conference. The pig conference was pretty big, but this one was even bigger, and then, Jun Borrás's conference on food sovereignty. So these things, it's not as if we decided to have a conference every year; these things kind of happened in an organic way depending on someone's interest, and then we can often get Kempf Fund money in order to sponsor the travel and the expenses of the conference.

04-01:36:48

Holmes:

You mentioned the Yale Sustainable Food Project, the Yale Farm. When this began in 2003, if I have my years correct, there at the corner, an empty lot off of Edwards Street, there was also a developing partnership over the years in a variety of arenas between the Yale Farm and the Agrarian Studies Program, which seems a natural. Discuss that a little bit about some of those collaborations.

04-01:37:31

Scott:

I'm trying to remember. The Sustainable Food Project is the product of many hands, a lot of undergraduates, Alice Waters, who had a daughter at Yale then, was very influential in the Sustainable Food Project, and a guy named Ian Cheney. He actually made a film about corn: *King Corn*. He was an undergraduate, and he petitioned his way into the graduate class. We have a certain number of undergraduates who take that seminar if they kind of petition their way in, and he did that, and he organized Sustainable Food Evenings at Berkeley College. He was a Berkeley College undergraduate, and I think he was largely responsible for creating the momentum. I still remember his application—we're talking about 2001, 2002—a petition to get into my class with a sort of weird essay, that I kind of didn't like much but it was so weird, I thought, I want to have this student in my class anyway just to see, and he went on to do all of these things.

And so, the first people who ran the Sustainable Food Project were both from Harvard: Josh Viertel and Melina Shannon-Dipietro. Josh Viertel went to be head of Slow Food, and Melina went to be in charge of all of the planting on the High Line in New York, and now, she is head of the Nordic Food Lab, of Redzepi's Nordic Food Lab. So they both went on to greater glory. The guy now, Mark Bomford, he's an extremely smart guy, well educated, thoughtful, and we're lucky to have him. Actually, I think he's not treated as well as he

deserves, and he's planning a big conference on sustainable food in the next year or two, and I think he's done a good job with the Sustainable Food Project.

So, we've worked with all of these people, both to include them—actually, I've had them in my classes in the Agrarian Studies seminar, and now you make me realize that we should probably always every year have Mark Bomford, because he's intellectually very, very strong. We should have one seminar devoted to farming and organic farming, that he would name the readings for, that would be part of the graduate seminar. He'd be extremely good. He could actually teach the course as well as anybody, to tell the truth.

04-01:41:16

Holmes:

You mentioned [René] Redzepi—because I was here when he was brought to Yale. His restaurant, Noma, I think is essentially one of the top-rated restaurants in the world.

04-01:41:34

Scott:

For two years, he was voted the best restaurant in the world.

04-01:41:37

Holmes:

Mm-hmm. Discuss how you got in touch with Redzepi, and it also, I think, bespeaks to the Program in Agrarian Studies that he agreed to actually come out.

04-01:41:52

Scott:

So, I want to take credit for this. I think I can, too. So, I was, for a semester in Copenhagen, teaching, and my partner, Anna Tsing, was at Aarhus north of Copenhagen, the second biggest city, and we went back and forth seeing one another a lot. I lived on a street called Strandgade, Beach Street, and Anna had heard of the Noma, this restaurant, and how good it was, and we were just walking around, strolling, and we came across the back end of this restaurant. They had a separate thing out back where they were putting the desserts, and we saw all these people working, and she'd heard great things about this restaurant, so she made a reservation for us to have lunch there, and this is before Noma was famous, but she'd heard wonderful things about it.

I'm not a real foodie in a sort of pedantic sense. My idea of a good restaurant is that they give you really good food, and they leave you alone to have a conversation, and here, I thought they were a little intrusive telling us everything about the dish. However, two courses into the seven-course meal—it was small dishes, and it was lunch—but after fifteen or twenty minutes, we realized that the only thing worth talking about was the food. The food was, it was not only beautiful and unique and interesting, but it tasted like a million dollars. It was just a kind of level in which you wanted to keep it in your mouth for as long as possible. You'd never had such a taste—I'm being quite serious. And so, Anna and I, for the next month and a half, we would say

things like, "Do you remember the taste of that? Oh my God." We kept going back to these dishes.

Anyway, I decided I'd like to have Redzepi, and so I wrote him, essentially, a love letter, telling him that he was the best thing since sliced bread or whatever. I went over the top, and it was sincere, and he decided to come. What's really interesting to me is that I thought Redzepi was doing us a great favor, and of course, he was a great hit while he was here. People loved having him here, and it turns out that Denmark is a really egalitarian society in which they don't like people who get too big for their britches. And so, everyone realized that Redzepi—it was a good restaurant—but it turns out that the Danes are so modest about themselves, that you only can become famous in Denmark if someone outside of Denmark thinks you're important and good.

And so it turned out, in a way that I didn't understand at the time, that us inviting Redzepi to America to talk about his restaurant was a big deal for his reputation back in Denmark. And so from his perspective, he wasn't doing us a favor, so much as we were doing him a favor, and it helped his reputation, and so he's been absolutely magnificent to us, and to the point where, I know that I could call up Redzepi and ask for a reservation tomorrow night, and other people are waiting for a year, I'd probably get a reservation, because he loves the hell out of us. And so, actually, I thought he was so interesting that I went out of my way to spend a day writing the letter that I thought might get him here.

04-01:46:27

Holmes:

Over the years, if we think of this large umbrella—I think is a good way to say it—called Agrarian Studies, we've seen the variety of topics and discourses that have flowed underneath that umbrella expand fairly dramatically. And here what I'm thinking of in particular is the rise of food politics, which somewhat dovetailed and paralleled the development of Agrarian Studies itself. What are your observations on the development of that? Because this kind of dovetails even with the Yale Farm—that there is graduate students with perhaps some different interests coming into those rooms to talk about food.

04-01:47:24

Scott:

Also a good point. So, Michael Pollan, I got to know Michael Pollan because he telephoned me a long time ago when he was writing, I think, *The Botany of Desire*, because he was interested in this standardization and what I had to say about agriculture in *Seeing Like a State*. So he called me and we had like a two-hour discussion on the phone of him picking my brain about things that he was interested in and that were in *Seeing Like a State*, and he came to agrarian studies, by the way, and we had actually a little conference in which he came as well. We were doing something and I remember when figuring out how to do it, had to do with land tenure and soil, and he said "You know, if you wanted to really go and have a wide audience, don't start with land tenure;

start with food. If you start with food, you can take people anywhere because everybody identifies with food. They're interested in it," and so on. Michael Pollan knows where the zeitgeist is headed, and I think he's a great public intellectual, in many ways. And so, he understood that we should start with food.

Anyway, so, the people who started Agrarian Studies, including me, at the beginning, were interested in peasant revolution, agriculture, third-world farms, and rebellion, wars of national liberation, peasant movements, and maybe farm movements as well. Today, the interests are much more about environmental change and food, organic farming and food ways and so on. So, what's happened of course is that like any program, one of the reasons we're alive is that we have moved a little with our clientele, and embraced the kinds of interests that they have, and the papers that they're doing and the dissertations that they're doing.

04-01:50:03
Holmes:

It also seems, too, as you were mentioning, this shift, not as much away from the traditional topics that were under the umbrella of agrarian studies, but also of adding more topics. I wanted to ask: when we think of Yale's Forestry School, which is one of the original places of studying not just forestry but environmental studies in the nation, the partners and faculty within there, also, I would imagine, helped Agrarian Studies, not just in its community but also its growth.

04-01:50:47
Scott:

Absolutely. People whose main appointment you could say is in Forestry and Environmental Studies have taught [in the seminar of] Agrarian Studies. So John Wargo has taught Agrarian Studies; Michael Dove has taught Agrarian Studies. I think that probably, something like half of our students—maybe that's too much, but not so far away—a plurality of the students who take the Agrarian Studies seminar are likely to be F&ES students, or at least the joint anthropology and F&ES degree that's available. So, those people have been important, and of course, as our concern with the environment has intensified, they've become even more important.

04-01:51:41
Holmes:

Jim, in this final section of our discussion here, I wanted just to have you reflect a little bit on your career and a few other related items. In looking back on your career, over these years, what are some of your proudest achievements?

04-01:52:10
Scott:

I'm thinking. So, apropos of the counter-narrative theme, it seems to me, I'm rather proud that I did not follow the forced march of my discipline, and that I decided for personal and intellectual reasons to do things that were heterodox and at the margin of my discipline, and at least as a topic and as methodology that is not respected, and I ended up making a pretty good career out of being

a dissident, if you like. And if I'm proud of that—I think I'm proud that I did it, of course, but I'm also proud that I hope that encourages other people to take similar kinds of risks, and not to sort of knuckle under to the orthodoxy.

That is, I tell students, "do not choose a dissertation topic because you think it's what your dissertation advisor wants you to choose," and that the little gut you had in the discipline that is sort of right, the kind of smart disciplinary topic to choose—because first of all, you're never going to make any money to speak of, and so if you're after money, go and sell used cars or do something, a stockbroker or something else. You're in the wrong racket if you want to make money. So, since you're not going to make money, and if you've fucking well decided to be a teacher and professor anyway, if you're not having fun, then it's crazy! And besides, if you're not having fun, you're not pouring your passion and interest and so on; if you're doing it because you're looking over your shoulder to see what the discipline expects of you, then you're likely to be not doing your best work. Plus you don't have your heart in it because you're doing it because of someone's expectations and what the world expects of you. You may not succeed. You may fail. You may not get tenure, maybe end up selling used cars, but you're not going to do your best work if you're not having fun and following your passions."

And I think I'm careful about saying that to people, because when I was looking for a job, anybody who studied the Third World could get a job, so, it was easy for me, comparatively. So I'm conscious of the different pressures that graduate students face now, but I see too many graduate students who are like little professionals already, and seem to have lost that kind of daring and intellectual spark that one wishes they had, and that's probably caused in part by the fact that our admissions committee is choosing little professionals who come from the same Ivy League schools. You know, Tim Pachirat came from Wheaton College, I think, right? Not the standard background for a Yale graduate student.

04-01:56:06

Holmes:

How have you seen the academy change over your career, and in thinking about the good, the bad, the—

04-01:56:14

Scott:

The ugly.

04-01:56:14

Holmes:

—not so savory? [laughs]

04-01:56:26

Scott:

I think, actually, there's a tension that I see. It seems to me that the disciplines within themselves have become increasingly professionalized, and kind of narrow with respect to methodology and so on, and less tolerant of deviations, and more strict. It's especially true of economics and political science, and to some extent, sociology. It's not true of history, and it's not true of

anthropology. You could give a title of a dissertation and almost any title would plausibly be in history or anthropology, because those disciplines don't tell you exactly what you should be doing, and also, history is place based, in some fundamental way, and anthropology is based on a kind of phenomenology and ethnography. So I think those are the two disciplines that have maintained a kind of broad latitude of the things that one can study and how one can study them, and that are more eclectic and open and lend themselves to interdisciplinary work.

Political science and economics have become narrower and narrower, and so, because I'm a political scientist and I live in a political science department most of my life, I see this tension between people who want to do broad things, and who feel that they can't do that and be a successful political scientist. Tim Pachirat thought about leaving political science. He did something that was not orthodox and stayed in political science. I have a student, Jensen Sass—I don't know if you know him—does a history of Monsanto. He's finishing. He left for sociology. I have another student who left for law, another student who left for anthropology. So, in a sense, I find that a certain number of students whom I like and find interesting intellectually, they just decide that they're not going to suffer the discipline and jump through the hoops that political science wants them to jump through, and that's, of course, the way that political science becomes even narrower.

04-01:59:17
Holmes:

What are your hopes for the Agrarian Studies Program? I know you often say you're not a pundit; you don't try to predict things or read the future. But here, what do you hope for the program that you helped establish?

04-01:59:44
Scott:

I hope it flies forever, I guess. On the other hand, the last thing I want to do is to have it be Jim Scott Incorporated Enterprises. That is to say, it seems to me it's like my books: once they're out there, it's up to other people to make of them what they like. I'm happy I started this, but I don't feel at all responsible for it taking my direction. I think it should deviate according to the people who are running it and interested in it, and I wish it well, and controlling it is the last thing in the world I want to do. Just as I never wanted to run anything anyway, far be it for me to sort of imagine that I want to kind of control, corral, or constrain whatever happens to Agrarian Studies, whether it lives or dies. I hope it lives, but I don't think it ought to sort of live according to my particular lights. I should let it go its own way.

04-02:00:56
Holmes:

Jim, I wanted to ask: We all stand on the shoulders of others. Are there scholars that have passed that you'd like to recognize and say a few words about?

04-02:01:08

Scott: I was thinking you were going to say, "We all have our boot on the neck of others, and who would you like to crush and have disappear?" I have a list of those people too.

04-02:01:18

Holmes: That will be our backstage conversation. [laughter]

04-02:01:20

Scott: Right, right. So, I have, in the formal sense, great scholars who I feel deeply indebted to. They are—in no particular order— Karl Polanyi; E. P. Thompson; Marc Bloch; this guy A. V. Chayanov; Ester Boserup; and I suppose Jane Jacobs taught me a whole hell of a lot as well. I have three of those people, pictures of them, that I kind of put above my desk, and so they are kind of deep influences that I keep going back to. And after my barn burned down and I built a new one, I made pastel or charcoal portraits of all of them to replace the photos I've lost. I've had colleagues who are not sort of what, that don't have the public luminescence of E. P. Thompson, for example, or Marc Bloch, but who were people I taught with and learned a lot from. The most important one of those is Ed Friedman, with whom I taught the politics of peasant revolution at Wisconsin, who taught me a lot about anarchism. I find myself going back to things he's urged me to read, things that he has said or written that are important. Eric Wolf would be another one, I guess, and it's interesting that you will notice that many of these people are historians rather than political scientists.

So there's, of the people who taught me whom I respect: Bob Lane, Bob Dahl, Ed Lindblom, and so on; this guy Carl Lande who I mentioned much earlier was important for my understanding of Southeast Asia, but it's interesting that the kind of intellectual sources of my work for the last ten or fifteen years have not been political scientists, because I very rarely ever go to their annual meeting. When I have gotten the *American Political Science Review* in my mailbox because I'm a member and it comes automatically, it makes a very short trip between my mailbox and the trashcan. I don't even bother to open it. So that tells you as much as you need to know about my relationship to formal political science; whereas, I still subscribe to *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Journal of Peasant Studies*. I think those are, aside from other things I'm on the editorial board of, those are the two journals that I actually want a physical copy of. I don't read them all the time either, I might add, but I they're both interdisciplinary journals, and *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, I think, is one of the most exciting journals still around.

04-02:05:05

Holmes: I also wanted to ask, are there scholars that you would like to acknowledge that are still frolicking around and making a ruckus?

04-02:05:28

Scott:

Most of the scholars who made a ruckus that I admire are dead, [laughter] and most of the scholars who I admire who are alive are not making a ruckus. [laughter] There are people that, they're anarchist scholars whom I've learned a lot from. I don't maybe cite them as much as I should, but people like—well, he's dead: Colin Ward. I'm thinking of people who were self-identified anarchists of one kind or another: a guy named Richard Day; this guy Hakim Bey—actually, it's a pseudonym, and he was a theorist of "temporary autonomous zones"—and John Zerzan, an influential thinker for the Black Bloc. These are people who are trying to understand the kind of anarchist subtext in lots of movements and so on, and so these people are probably not read in the academy very much, but they are endlessly interesting. The people who are deeply interested in the history of incarceration and resistance within prisons and prison unions, the people who are working on campaigns against forced labor in prisons, and again, these are people that, God help them, they don't write in the journals that are the disciplinary journals in the academy that are normally taught, but if I were to teach another course on anarchism, I would be teaching their stuff.

04-02:07:24

Holmes:

Lastly, for scholars, we often look at the shoulders we stand on, meaning the scholars who came before us, those who are our colleagues who have helped us and taught us, but I also wanted to ask if you wanted to say a few words about the family at home that actually often has to deal with us scholars and our intricacies and work habits, and yet also provide that foundation even more than our scholarly colleagues.

04-02:08:01

Scott:

Yes, and as you know from having mentioned at some point my acknowledgements, that is the last thing I want to do, is to say that "I'm grateful to this, that, and the other for being patient with me and tolerant, and allowing me to write," and so on. They were neither patient nor tolerant, and they didn't see it as their job to help me write books, and thank God, that's why they were interesting. And I thank my wife, who died in 1997, to whom I was married for thirty-five years, I was a civilizational project of hers. She had an unbelievably firm grasp of the history of arts, letters, and music, particularly with respect to Europe but not just with respect to Europe. She knew a tremendous amount about Japanese, Chinese ceramics, and so on, and she was an art historian, a great art historian in her own right, and taught at Southern Connecticut and Connecticut College. And so my knowledge of arts and letters and music, and my intellectual breadth that is wider than most political scientists, is entirely an effect of Louise's civilizational project, of making me more civilized than I otherwise was. It would be hard to exaggerate how barbaric I was, to use that term, until I got into her hands.

So she educated me. She gave me—you can see from the house—a sense of aesthetics and decoration and color and art and so on, and that's become a part of me and it's part of her heritage. My children, they didn't help me write

books either. I was probably a neglectful father when they were teenagers, and they've all done me proud. They were great children to their mother when their mother was sick, and they've been unbelievably supportive of one another, at times of trouble and stress, and it makes me—what's the word? I'm in awe of the way in which they care and look after one another, even with their many disagreements and so on. So, it's impressive to me, and we, of course, vacation together a lot, which, I think people of my age with their kids, it doesn't happen all that often in many families, and several people have noted it to me that we seem closer that way. Maybe it's because we lost Louise.

Also, my books, from *The Art of Not Being Governed* onward, have benefited from my partner, Anna Tsing. We think and write about some of the same subjects, and we're both Southeast Asianists, and she's a real anthropologist as opposed to me being a fake anthropologist. I was Louise's student, and in another way, Anna and I are students of one another because we work on the same subjects. We trade drafts. We talk about the stuff all the time. And so, I have noticed that my own work has been deeply influenced by Anna's sense of environment, of the natural world of interspecies relations. I don't think I could have done those—it would be hard to exactly extract it all, but I don't think those works would have many of the good qualities that they have had if not been for my relationship to Anna.

04-02:12:58

Holmes:

Well Jim, thank you so much for your time in this interview, and your hospitality here at the farm. Are there any final words that you wanted to say?

04-02:13:08

Scott:

I don't think so. I've never had a chance to reflect like this on my work and my history in Agrarian Studies, and it'll take me some time to digest and assimilate. I think I've kind of learned things just by babbling, and thank you for your perceptive questions. The idea that someone should pay that much attention to me and my work is an honor all by itself; that it should be Todd Holmes, it's even more of an honor. So thank you very much.

04-02:13:37

Holmes:

All right, thanks, Jim.

[End of Interview]