With one ambitious shove of the ground floor doors of McCracken Hall a Patton College of Education student is reminded that Appalachia’s reach extends from Georgia to New York, and stretches past the foothills that cuddle Athens, Ohio. Selecting almost any route out of Athens a student will inevitably pass through any number of post-industrial coal towns that bring the empirical work of James Scott, author of *Seeing Like a State* and *Two Cheers for Anarchism* to mind. Within the pages of his work, Scott positions readers to challenge the ideologies that empower the nation-state while simultaneously disempowering rural people. Scott’s affection for agrarian people is evident in his body of work in which he examines the politics of subordinate classes in their struggle against an economic minded nation-state.

To rural scholars, educators, and advocates Scott is a fellow traveler whose body of work unfailingly questions the nation-state’s call for agrarian acquiescence. Beyond the bindings of his books Scott, who is one of the founders of the Yale Agrarian Studies Program, introduces students from various disciplines to the breadth of dilemmas rural people face. In a recent interview, Dr. Scott discussed his rural scholarship, his work with the Yale Agrarian Studies Program, and his advice for emerging rural scholars, educators and advocates.

**An Agrarian in the Academy**

Scott began his career at the University of Wisconsin-Madison before returning to Yale (his alma mater). While teaching a course in peasant revolutions at Madison he became interested in the politics of subordinate classes. His interest in peasants took him to a Malay village and led to the penning of *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. While his degree classifies him as a political scientist, it is perhaps more fitting to say he is an agrarian in and out of the academy. In the following series of questions Dr. Scott discusses his work as a rural scholar.

*Dr. Scott, your body of work illustrates great care and concern for rural people and places. What influenced you to engage in a career in which so much of your work focuses on rurality?*

I do not have a rural background myself. I grew up in a small town and we became relatively poor when I was nine years old because my father died. Therefore, I did a fair amount of stoop labor such as picking corn and peaches. We lived in New Jersey, not too far from Philadelphia. My relationship to rural life, then, comes really from being a Southeast Asianist as well as my interests in the origins of the Vietnam War. I wrote a quite different dissertation in Malaysia on civil servants, but then I got to Madison and I spent a lot of time speaking out against the
Vietnam War. I worked with Edward Friedman, a China specialist, to build a course about peasant revolutions, which was quite popular at the time, as you might imagine. This led to my reading a lot about peasants because I was interested in the origins of peasant uprising. I began reading European and South East Asian literature, and I decided that it would not be a bad thing to devote my career to understanding peasants because they were the largest class in world history.

*Is there a particular reason you decided to make a career of studying peasants?*

Even though the world is fast urbanizing, there are more peasants now than in any other time in world history. I thought this was an honorable and worthy thing to devote my career to, but it is not as if I had a life plan.

*Your body of work and academic service are both impressive. Is there a particular text you authored that you believe has specifically advanced students’ understanding of the challenges rural people encounter?*

That is not for me to say, but I can answer a slightly different question which is if you ask me which book I am proudest of I would probably say Weapons of the Weak. This is partly because it represented for me two years in a Malay village. For someone not trained as an anthropologist I do not think I worked so hard and learned so fast in my life much as I did in those two years in that Malay village. The insights I had were hard won insights and I worked really hard. This started with me not having much idea of what would come of that and it turned out to be a useful book for lots of people. I worked very hard on Weapons of the Weak.

Now the book that has sold more copies than anything else by a long shot is Seeing Like a State. I think if you were to ask the question what book of mine has been most influential, in the social sciences anyway, it would probably be Seeing Like a State.

That said, the book Domination and the Arts of Resistance was my effort to write a more accessible book about the insights of Weapons of the Weak. Although that book has not sold as many copies as Seeing Like a State, it traveled very, very far outside of the field of political science into literary criticism, feminist studies, and actually Biblical studies.

*The complexities of rural life are often overlooked. However, your work recognizes these complexities. Is there something you hope people will take away from your body of work about rural people and places?*

I suppose you could say going back to Weapons of the Weak that if I think there is a single insight there it is the idea that in situations where most political scientists think there are no politics
going on that there are always politics going on. Political scientists are, for the most part, making a mistake when they are only looking for formal organizations with you know banners, and names, and manifestos, and political parties and demonstrations, and social movements that people study. I thought I had found a kind of politics below the radar, which is always there even when there is no formal activity. Since most people, or historically most farmers and peasants, have not lived in a political system where they could make much of a peep publicly, the kind of politics that I found is the kind of politics that for most of world history has been politics of subordinate classes.

*Contemporary rural Americans are experiencing many notable dilemmas, for example, natural resource extraction and outmigration. Much of your work captures the struggles of rural people and small communities. How might scholars, teachers, community leaders and other interested parties apply your work to their own work within America’s rural communities?*

Two things I should say. First of all I have an Appalachian background. My father’s family all came from West Virginia, near the northern part by Fairmont, Morgantown, and Parkersburg. All of my father’s siblings went to the University of West Virginia in Morgantown. I have this kind of Appalachian connection and it has always been quite strong. I have actually done a lot of reading about the history of Appalachia. That said, it seems to me the great insight of anthropology is methodology. What I mean is if you want to know how a rural community works you ought to just settle down there and spend a year, year and half, two years with your eyes open and asking questions. I promise you will know more about that community than anyone else in the community because they are not busy working at it. My advice is for people to settle down and work hard at understanding a community and make sure they understand the community’s relationship to outsiders. I don’t know if you know Rebecca Scott, but she did a work on mountain top removal and that is the kind of work that I’m talking about. It seems to me there are relatively few people who try to get underneath the skin of all of this.

*Given our conversation, I can’t help but ask if you have any thoughts on how your work or your contemporaries work helps people better understand resource extraction in rural areas?*

I think I am more and more drawn to good history. Let’s say if you were interested in fracking today it seems to me that you could just sort of study contemporary fracking and all the disputes around it, but you probably wouldn’t write something half so interesting as if you had gone back and done a history of mining, for example, which is a much older and deeper history that has some of the same environmental consequences. It seems to me that anybody who is interested in resource extraction and does not go back to the great mine strikes and Harlan County and Eastern Kentucky is making a mistake because they are unable to put this in the context of a long arc of resource extraction in this area.
Rural Rhetoric and the Yale Program in Agrarian Studies

Scott’s affinity for engaging in dialogue influenced the founding of the Yale Program in Agrarian Studies. The program, which brings together graduate students from a multitude of disciplines, has hosted rural scholars from throughout the United States. In this next series of questions, Scott discusses the program’s history and guiding principles. He also offers advice to others leading rural programs.

At Yale you serve as Co-Director of the Program in Agrarian Studies. Each year the program sponsors a weekly colloquium, undergraduate seminar, graduate seminar, and includes a fellows program. What is the inspiration for this program?

I started teaching at the University of Wisconsin --taught there for eight years-- and then moved to Yale. I found that when I got interested in peasants, of course, that most of the people I was interested in talking to at Wisconsin were people in the agricultural school; people in what was then called the land tenure center; people in rural sociology, historians and so on. When I was at Wisconsin and was trying to get smarter about studying rural life I found my intellectual community was outside of political science by and large. People in political science were not even remotely interested in rural people and so I kind of had to hand craft a community.

When I came to Yale I came with tenure and I did not have a lot of connections here, although I had been a graduate student here. After a year or so I decided if I was going to have an intellectual community at Yale, I was going to have to create one myself, so I picked out people whose works I admired and made a point of getting to know them and their work. One thing led to another and starting in ‘90 or ‘91 four of us decided to teach together a graduate seminar in the comparative study of rural societies, which is the kind of seminar we teach today. To our astonishment fifty-two people showed up and it became the biggest graduate seminar in Yale’s history. We were kind of surprised. I don’t think it was anything we did that was brilliant, but what we did was collected all these graduate students who felt they were orphans in their own department and flocked to this seminar. As it turned out there was someone who worked for the Rockefeller Foundation who knew Yale pretty well and he was interested in what had happened. He said, “Look if you people ever want to do anything more grandiose of this kind let me know I’d be interested.”

I never wanted to found or create any institution, but it got me thinking that well, maybe if I created something that looked like the seminar I’d always wanted to have for myself, and for selfish reasons, then I might be interested in helping to run an institution that had that kind of intellectual payoff for me. We got grants from Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, which funded us for about twelve years. After they had sort of gone through three cycles of funding they said, “Well you’ve proved your worth, so Yale should pick this up.” Fortunately, we had a
sympathetic provost at the time who decided this would be supported out of the Yale funds. Still, it has been a struggle since every new provost wants to cut us out and diminish our budget, which continues today. We’re in struggles right now, actually, over trying to diminish our funding, and so on. It has always been a struggle.

**How would you characterize the challenges of establishing and maintaining the program?**

Well I think it is fair to say that we could have been called at the very beginning a program in peasant studies and most of the people who were involved in the beginning tended to be people who worked in the third worlds. I study South East Asia. There were others involved who worked in Latin America, Africa, China and so on. I made a point, by the way, of making sure this was not narrowly about only the third world or social science. Instead we have people who worked on Tang Dynasty poetry about rural life in China; we have people who worked on rural Appalachian crafts; we have people who worked Inuit folktales and so on. The idea is to always broaden the horizon of people who are studying rural life so that they are not confined to a discipline. We recruit students who have to make sense across disciplinary boundaries. We tried to make it as broad as possible. We have people who join us and influence more changes. For example we have professors who study Medieval Europe and professors who study contemporary uprisings in Guatemala and El Salvador. We have also become much more of an environmentalist program as well because there is a forestry and environmental studies school that sends us a fair amount of students who are more interested in the environment, but we persuade them they should be interested in the communities as well as the environment. We have moved, to a certain extent, in a natural organic way that reflects the interest of the faculty. Maybe there are twenty or twenty-five professors who have taught in this seminar over a long period of time and huge numbers of graduate students. The dissertations associated with agrarian studies (we do not have a major ourselves) are much broader studies then they would have been if the Agrarian Studies Program did not exist.

**You mentioned something that I hear when I talk with people who work with various rural programs, which is even when the program is successful it is still a struggle to secure funding. Do you think that is just a general problem across the board in education right now, or do you think it is more specific to programs with a rural focus?**

I think it is a harder slog for people who are studying rural life, definitely. Universities are, if they are not urban themselves, by and large urban oriented institutions. Most of the intelligentsia doesn’t have dirty fingernails. The one thing that has changed that for us is the tremendous undergraduate interest in agriculture and food policy. I think people’s interest in how stuff is grown, how it gets to your table, and whether its good for your or not --that interest has been a kind of boon to us and brings us people who otherwise would not be interested in the study of let’s say migrant laborers and how crops are grown and so on.
You mention the wide range of disciplines students in your program represent. What might students who are active in the program gain from their engagement in agrarian studies?

We made a decision very early to be a certain kind of program, which we paid a small price for, but I think it was a wise decision. We have a colloquium ever week which features an outside person coming in. This author never gives a talk. They send a paper in advance that is no more than thirty to thirty-five pages long. Everybody who comes to the seminar needs to read it or it is not worth their time coming in the first place because they are not going to be spoon fed the talk. Instead we give the guest author no more than five to ten minutes to frame the paper if they want to. Then I do something I learned from the Women’s Studies Program at Wisconsin, we have a discussion for forty-five minutes during which time the authors are asked not to intervene or speak at all, to listen as if they were a fly on the wall. We have found that it creates a more focused discussion and by the time the author starts intervening we have created a discussion around two to three big issues that makes for a much more successful conversation. We decided we would rather have a smaller group of committed people who have read the paper, than a large group who are spoon fed the paper and then leave. We also have a catered lunch afterwards to allow people to talk and create links across disciplines.

Earlier in the interview you mentioned you benefit from the program as well. What new understandings have you formed based on your work with the program?

It’s hard to pinpoint it but one of the things I can say is I do not think I would have written Seeing Like a State unless I had heard so many people talk about failed development programs and started to think about the reasons why these programs had failed. I think of Seeing Like a State as a result of the seminar, the text is what Agrarian Studies gave me over the better part of a decade. The other thing I would mention is my reading list, and how it has changed as a result of working with people from so many different disciplines and graduate students from lots of departments. I think that if you put together my reading list, things I have read in the past twenty-five years, it would, if I had remained a political scientist even a political scientist interested in rural life, not have half the breadth that it has had as a result of having a kind of interdisciplinary community of professors and graduate students who bring stuff to my attention that I never would have encountered myself.

What advice do you have for directors of other rural programs?

Like every program you need a few people. How many is kind of uncertain. You need a few people with a lot of enthusiasm who are willing to make this their major priority and not do it with their left hand. The other thing, which is going to sound rather silly, I don’t know if I ever mentioned it or not, but when I was thinking of starting Agrarian Studies I went to see a guy named Norman Stone who ran Davis Center seminars at Princeton. He had run this program for
twenty years. I asked him, “Is there any trick about how to run a successful program?” Of course this is after a long talk about other aspects of the program. He said, “I’ll tell you one thing. It’s really important to have a social occasion immediately after the intellectual event that you have where people get to know one another and solidify personal contacts and friendships. To get to make acquaintances.” At the Agrarian Studies Program we operate under the assumption that intellectuals are not just brains floating in a bowl of formaldehyde. They have social needs and I think that graduate students are isolated and need a community. We make an effort to provide an intellectual and social community that is wrapped up in the same package.

**Taking the Backroad: Advice for Agrarian Academics**

Scott’s work as a political scientist and agrarian academic includes a significant amount of anthropological work. During the final questions of the interview, Scott reflects on his work in the field and offers some advice for fellow travelers.

**You have mentioned this throughout the interview, and I’ve noticed also from reading your work, that you seem to believe in reading widely. Which texts do you often recommend to students who are beginning a career in rural studies?**

I can mention a few, the first is not exactly a rural text, and it’s Karl Polanyi’s The Great Transformation. There are very few books that have had the impact that text had on me, and so I think nobody should be allowed in the door of a graduate school to study social sciences without having read Polanyi’s The Great Transformation. In terms of the history of peasantry, I recommend Marc Bloch’s Feudal Society. It is two paperback volumes but reads very easily—it’s a kind of brilliant book. Also E.P.(Edward) Thompson, almost anything of his on poaching and so on, he is a great historian of subordinate classes.

Those are all particularly Western oriented books. For development I think James Ferguson’s book called the Anti-Politics Machine is particularly good as well. Also Clifford Geertz’s Agricultural Involution, which is a study of Indonesia.

**In previous interviews you have mentioned the importance of reading fiction. Is there a fictional text that has impacted your thinking?**

I would be hard put to identify a single one. You will notice in both Weapons of the Weak and Domination and the Arts of Resistance there are lots of quotes from Balzac and Zola.

I’m bored by social science. Social science bores me to tears by and large even though I am one of them. I read a lot of poetry and fiction just as a way of clearing my head of the cobwebs social science puts there. Of course the fiction I pick up is fiction that I somehow think will have something interesting to say about topics I am interested in. For me it’s become perhaps a
conscious policy, but its origin is out of boredom and comes from wanting to do something with
my brain other than read social science. There are just a lot of insights that people have who are
not social scientists that are superior to social science insights. I would include in this group
people who are activists like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson. Both are sort of agricultural
pioneers and activists who happen to write extremely well about these issues, much better than
social scientists.

*You write quite a bit, you read quite a bit, and you are very engaged in teaching. How do you
balance these three things? I think this is something that graduate students are always pondering.*

I also run a small farm. For about twenty-three years I raised sheep. I did my own shearing and
sold the lambs to the Greeks and Italians at Easter. I am not only a busy person, I also like things
that are a change of pace. People would ask me how could you possibly raise sheep and still
write stuff? I thought I would waste an hour every morning reading the *New York Times* when I
could be moving bales of hay or checking on my sheep. I need something everyday that leaves
my head alone and requires my arms and body. I do not find it so much of a conflict. I am pretty
old these days, seventy-five, and I am not yet retired. Part of me wishes I could get rid of some
of the academic stuff (letters of recommendation and reading dissertations). For example, I read
seven dissertations this spring and that was not the happiest week of my spring. I have a feeling
that when I draw my last breath there is going to be a line of graduate students asking for letters
of recommendation before I die.

*Your work is cited in many fields of study. Diane Ravitch even discussed your book Seeing like
a State in her text The Death and Life of the Great American School System. Have you ever
thought about how your work applies to issues in America’s education system?*

Yes, now you can only do so much, and if people find it useful, good for them and I am proud.
However, my most recent what I call “Scott Lite” book is Two Cheers for Anarchism has a
section on testing and quantitative measures of quality, which I am against by and large. Also a
kind of, although not very deeply thought out, but strongly felt criticism of contemporary
education at the primary and secondary levels as well. I think schooling was invented at the same
time as the factory and they bear a strong resemblance to one another by and large. I have
thought about that, but you know I do not have the expertise, interest, or inclination to drive it
much further than I have already.

*You mentioned your most recent book; do you believe any of your other texts might be useful
for educators?*

There are only two books that I have written that are not heavily pedagogical. One is Two Cheers
for Anarchism, which is very chatty. The other one, I suppose partly because people can
recognize it at work in their own life, is Domination and the Arts of Resistance. It seems to me it kind of resonates with a lot of people and it kind of illuminates things that have puzzled them and that they would like to understand. Those are the only two books that my children have taken a stab at reading. The others are kind of heavy pedagogical books that I would not want to wish on teachers unless they had some kind of disease that required that kind of treatment.

You mentioned in your interview with Richard Snyder that scholars often pose irrelevant research questions and you suggested this is problem inherent to dissertations. When you work with students how do you encourage them to address interesting questions?

That is hard, actually, I do not think I do that as well as I should. My partner is kind of a model in that respect because she will spend a whole day walking in the woods with a graduate student helping them think about a topic. I think I am a lot lazier in that way. I can, however, tell a student that a topic they have claimed is not terribly interesting in the form they have claimed it and encourage them to read some stuff and think about reframing it in a different way. In general, most dissertations, even if they are brilliant, most often address a question no one quite cares about. I do think it is better to have partial success with a really interesting and relevant question rather than complete success filling in a little cell in some other large scheme. One thing that I do say to graduate students is that if you have a really narrow dissertation topic you can say: “Okay if I do this dissertation, what kinds of stuff am I going to be reading to carry this off?” If it is one of those kind of deep and narrow holes in which it is more and more specialized then it better be a brilliantly successful dissertation because you are going to be stupider at the end. If you take a larger question in which the risks are often greater, even if the dissertation is not a total success, you are going to be brighter because of all the stuff you have had to put under your belt and read, so it is going to make your next project better. One question students can ask themselves is: “What is the kind of reading program that is going to match this question, and is it going to make me a brighter, more interesting, more versatile, and more resilient scholar?”

What is the most interesting question you have addressed in your own work?

I don’t think I have an answer to that. You can say I have been interested in a generic way as to how people with less power operate and construct their lives, strategies, and get by. You can say I have devoted my career to the understanding of subordinate classes. I don’t think I have anything that rises to the dignity of some big question.

Throughout your career you have had a number of remarkable experiences and engaged in some lively debates. What advice do you have for emerging scholars in rural studies, based on your past experiences?

If you think about it, one of the reasons I am less of a political scientist than what I might otherwise have been is that I have not written books with the premise to lay out the state of the discipline and the debate and then create my own position about it. Weapons of the Weak is the
closest to that in a sense as it engages Gramsci and other people. By and large Domination and the Arts of Resistance could have been written as a kind of dialogue with Foucault and Bourdieu, but I decided that I wanted to write it in a more accessible way without the heavy pedagogical references. That is a personal choice, so I don’t want to recommend it to everybody, it just happens to be the way I like to write. It seems to be a much cleaner way and less clogged. As someone said, “You may not agree with Scott, but it is clear what he is saying.” I try to be clear and lucid, and I think it helps to not to have a big pedagogical apparatus.

As you know I have lots of critics and that is fine because it means a lot of people have read my work. However, I don’t spend a lot of time defending my turf and replying to critics. I am usually on to the next thing, more interested in that, as I have said, than what I had to say about the last subject. I think answering critics at length it is actually a mistake. Whatever you do it ends up sounding defensive, so I just don’t bother with that. Partly because it seems to me to be a distraction and prevents me from reading other stuff I would rather read. You may or may not know that there is a book criticizing The Moral Economy of the Peasant called the Rational Peasant. I had written something like forty pages of a critique of the Rational Peasant and I threw it away. I just thought, “I’m not going to do this. I’m going to move on to the next thing.” I was happy with the critique, but this is not the way I am going to spend my life.

I think every discipline, every field of study, has, if you think about it, a whole series of taken for granted assumptions. It seems to me the kind of trick of doing something original is to say: “What are these assumptions that lie behind how we approach these problems?” Once you tease out the underlying assumptions you can say: “Well does that make any sense? What if we made the reverse assumption?” It seems to me that kind of going to the sort of root conceptual and process assumptions of the field that you are in, thinking hard about them and how it might change scholarship if you didn’t adopt them or adopted some type of different variant of them, increases the chances of you doing something original. It is the argument for wide reading. If, for example, all you read is mainstream political science then you are going to reproduce mainstream political science. Junk in, junk out. Even if its good stuff--good stuff in, good stuff out-- it is going to be kind of narrow. Most of the things that upset the field by doing something original come from outside that field because the field has already formed its assumptions. If you do wide reading, then you are less prone to just accept at face value the assumptions of your discipline.

In addition to your own writing about rural issues, you engage in discussion with other rural scholars. The program at Yale allows you to hear many people throughout the U.S. and beyond speak about these issues. In closing what suggestions do you have for rural scholars, teachers, and leaders?

Not much beyond the idea of ethnography. If you want to understand farmers, go talk to farmers and go follow them through a crop cycle. Listen to the way they talk about these things. Go to
groups of farmers and pay attention to a 4-H club and so on. I’ve always felt that a close and kind of naive eyes wide-open study of anything will lead to insights. E.O. Wilson as a little boy decided he just wanted to spend all of his life watching ants. You need a series of lenses. If you are not paying attention to it, you will not see it at all. That kind of close to the ground, meticulous, intensive, long-term observation is what one needs in addition to a kind of set of multidisciplinary lenses.

Before we close the interview is there anything you want to come back to or add?

If you are going to devote your life to studying people who grow rice, then you should at least, hopefully, grow one rice crop yourself. --James Scott

The Institute for Democracy in Education wishes to humbly thank Dr. James Scott for his time and most importantly his devotion to agrarian people. To quote Wendell Berry, “It all turns on affection.”