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## Peter Carstens (1929-2010)

Stanley R. Barrett *University of Guelph*

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For almost half a century as a tenured faculty member and later as Professor Emeritus, Peter Carstens graced the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto and played a prominent role in the development of the discipline in Canada. He was born in 1929 in Cape Town, and raised in Kleinsee, a diamond mining community bordering the Atlantic Ocean on the west coast of South Africa in a territory known as Namaqualand. In 1952 he completed a B.A. in social anthropology at Rhodes University, and a year later a B.A. in sociology. In 1961 he received his Ph.D. in social anthropology from the University of Cape Town.

From 1956 to 1964 he was a lecturer at the School of African Studies at Cape Town. He spent the 1962-3 academic year at the University of British Columbia after Harry Hawthorn, with whom he had been in communication about Indian reserves, arranged for him to be granted a Kroener Foundation Fellowship. During 1964-65 he was a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where his deep understanding of Marx, Weber and Durkheim had an influence on Lenski's monumental theoretical work, *Power and Privilege* (1966). In 1965 he emigrated to Canada to take up a position at the University of Toronto as an associate professor; four years later he was promoted to professor. He retired and was appointed Professor Emeritus in 1995.

Over the course of his career, Peter completed three original, long-term ethnographic projects. From 1952 to 1962 he focused on the social organization of the reserve system among the Nama, who inhabited the region of his birthplace. This research became the basis of his Ph.D. dissertation and his first book, *The Social Structure of a Cape Coloured Reserve* (1966). Years later he commented (personal communication) that he was not certain that he had got the theory side right, but he was confident the data were strong and accurate, and that was what was most important to him.

During his year at the University of British Columbia, he spent four months in a pilot study of nearby reserves. It was not until 1978 that his professional and personal commitments provided an opportunity to return to the project. From 1982 to 1991 he made five more trips to the Okanagan reserves, or a total of seven field visits altogether, ranging from periods of five weeks to five months.

The focus on Canadian reserves was a natural for him, given his previous research in South Africa, but not everyone was pleased with his eventual book, *The Queen's People* (1991), especially the postmodernists. He was criticized for understating the capacity of indigenous people to resist their oppressors and for appropriating their voice. Yet if ever there were a humanistic study of Canada's indigenous population, admirably historical in perspective and fully tuned to the inequities generated by hegemonic domination, *The Queen's People* fits the bill.

Peter was a relentless foe of apartheid. As a young man he regularly contributed pieces to newspapers condemning racism and was hounded by the state's security forces. In 1972, he received a Canada Council Research Grant to embark on a new project in Namibia, but was denied a visa by the South African government. In 1987 and 1990, as apartheid began to crumble, he was finally able to return to his natal country. He was surprised and pleased to discover that his 1966 book was well known in Namaqualand, and was wryly amused to learn that it was sometimes employed to settle disputes over land and genealogy (personal communication).

In 1992, Peter went back to South Africa to embark on his third major ethnographic project: the diamond mines of Kleinsee. This project was also a natural for him. His own father, a prospector, had been the first person to discover the rich diamond deposits at Kleinsee. Although his father quickly lost control to the powerful De Beers consortium, he became its employee as a mine pit superintendent from 1928 until his retirement in 1956. Before entering university, Peter worked for De Beers as a diamond sorter. Although his formal research in the community lasted 12 months, in a sense he had been engaged in the project for most of his life, and no doubt became his own informant. In 2001 his well-received volume, *In the Company of Diamonds*, was published, followed five years later by *Diamonds Are Dangerous*, a collection of delightful stories about diamond smuggling.

Around the turn of the new millennium, Peter decided to revisit his Nama material. He apparently had always been puzzled by what tradition meant to the Nama. What did they mean by "the old days," or "the old-old days," or even "the old-old-old days?" The initial examination of his well-worn field notes almost led him to abandon the proj-

ect. The topic was simply too elusive. Then, as he put it, "the muse played a tune," calling on him to embark on a novel methodology, one which reversed the arrow of time. In the final product, *Always Here, Even Tomorrow* (2007), vignettes of everyday life are merged without regard to chronology with letters from Nama individuals, government officials and missionaries, interspersed with Peter's field notes and memories. The last half of the book is absolutely stunning. Peter's friends and mentors in Namaqualand, dismayed at what they judged as his ignorance of their way of life, decided to organize a series of "Symposia in the Veld" for his edification about the old-old days and the eternal fusion of past, present and future. Ironically, in view of the criticisms levelled against *The Queen's People*, the final book that Peter wrote represents postmodernism at its best, although he never identified it as such. Only a scholar in possession of superb rapport and ethnographic depth could have pulled off this innovative masterpiece.

Peter was a magnificent but unusual teacher. Often he said little in his graduate seminars, but it only took a tilt of his chin or a delicate sniff of his nostrils to convey his impression of the ongoing discussion. His interests were classical, and his command of both social anthropological and sociological theory was impressive. Indeed, it is regrettable that he never got around to writing his own theory book. He was not one to respond to fads. He was promoting a Marxist perspective in the 1960s, but did not join the bandwagon when it emerged as the reigning orthodoxy a decade later. He was in essence a private man, not easy to get to know. He rarely talked in public about his previous life in South Africa, and his humility prevented him from focusing in the classroom on his own publications. Yet, as a teacher he was unfailingly supportive and compassionate when circumstances demanded it. His scholarly standards were high and inspiring, leaving students with the impression that there was no better place to be than in his classroom, but his standards were also intimidating, and it is an open question whether any of us managed to live up to them.

It is surprising that Peter never became a departmental Chair (certainly invitations to do so came his way), but he always pulled his weight in terms of administrative duties at the University of Toronto. He also served as President of the Canadian Association of Sociology and Anthropology and editor of *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, and sat on the editorial boards of several journals.

His inherent generosity towards other scholars and his editorial skills resulted in two volumes (Carstens 1985 and 1987) on the work of Winifred Hoernlé (1885-1960),

sometimes referred to as “the mother of social anthropology” in South Africa. Hoernlé and Carstens had much in common. Both grew up in mining communities (Hoernlé in Kimberley) and conducted their early field work in Namaqualand. Both were devoted teachers and implacable enemies of apartheid. Neither of them published as much as their talents warranted, although in retirement Peter made up for lost time, producing three more books. Both were influenced by Radcliffe-Brown. Hoernlé had known him when they were students together at Cambridge University, and interacted with him when they later became colleagues in South Africa. Peter told me that he had been taught by Radcliffe-Brown during the latter’s waning years (presumably at Rhodes University), and Peter’s personal effects include a hand-written letter of reference from Radcliffe-Brown in 1955 strongly supporting his application for the position of lecturer at the University of Cape Town. Although Peter did not hesitate to criticize his illustrious mentor, especially the artificial separation of synchronic and diachronic analysis, his focus on social structure and his advocacy of community studies and the comparative method never wavered.

There have been higher profile and more prolific anthropologists in Canada than Peter Carstens, but arguably none has been a more talented or capable scholar. He died on May 5, 2010, after several months of illness. He is survived by his wife Chantal and by his former wife, Madeleine, and their three children. With his passing, Canadian anthropology is decidedly less than it once was.

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