Richard Lee: The Politics, Art and Science of Anthropology

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Abstract: This introduction to the work of Richard B. Lee provides both a biographical sketch and an examination of major contributions his research has made to anthropology today. The biographical sketch of Richard B. Lee situates his development as a political anthropologist in the 1960s. The intellectual biography addresses his involvement in key debates about foraging peoples, the historicity of primitive communism, the social construction of gender and gender hierarchies, four-fields approaches in anthropology, and the role of the anthropologist in indigenous rights.

Keywords: ethnological theory, foraging societies, political anthropology, primitive communism, Richard Lee, San

Résumé : Cette introduction aux travaux de Richard B. Lee comprend une esquisse biographique et une analyse des contributions les plus importantes que ses recherches ont apportées à l'anthropologie actuelle. L'esquisse biographique situe le développement des intérêts de Richard B. Lee pour l'anthropologie politique dans les années 1960. La biographie intellectuelle rappelle son implication dans les débats-clés sur les chasseurs-cueilleurs, l'historicité du communisme primitif, la construction sociale du genre et des hiérarchies de genre, l'approche de l'anthropologie incluant quatre champs privilégiés et le rôle de l'anthropologue dans les luttes pour les droits des autochtones.

Mots-clés : théorie ethnologique, sociétés vivant de chasse et de cueillette, anthropologie politique, communisme primitif, Richard Lee, San

No *Festschrift* is complete without providing readers with a sense of the person and the emergence and development of the themes that occupy the scholar's intellectual life and social and political engagement. With the objective of portraying the person behind the work, politics and scholarship, I arranged a meeting with Richard to record some biographical details. The following is based on our taped exchanges which took place in Riverside, California, March 14-15, 2002.

Early Cultural Milieu

Richard Borshay Lee was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 20, 1937. His sister Rhea was 16 years older, born to his mother in her first marriage. Although Rhea married when Richard was only five years old, they have remained close throughout their lives and share a love of Yiddishkeit[1] and Major League Baseball.

Richard's parents were in their thirties at the time he was born. They had met in New York in the 1930s when both were active in left-wing circles. Anne Borshay worked for AMTORG, the Soviet-American trading company; Charles Liberman (later Lee) worked for the Longshoreman's Union as a bookkeeper. In early 1942 they decided to move to Toronto, "where my mother's family had settled after emigrating from Minsk, Russia at the turn of the century."[2] One of his earliest memories was crossing the U.S.-Canadian border in a vintage automobile, driving "to our new life in Canada."

Politics and Culture: Toronto in the 1940s and 1950s

For Lee, being the child of progressives became "the core of my consciousness." In Canada they moved to the edge of a well-to-do Toronto suburb, Forest Hill Village, which later became part of Toronto proper. Richard's father became a CPA and built up a modest practice. Lee went to the local public school, "South Prep," where he became aware that most of his schoolmates' families were far better off than his was:

> I had vivid memories of my mother and father saying, "Well, always remember, Richard, the poor, the working people are the salt of the earth, and so you have nothing to be ashamed of or apologize about," and that's the way I grew up…our family culture was classical music and literature while [some of my richer classmates' families] were going on gambling junkets to Havana.…

Still, in the late 1940s the institutions of Jewish community life in Toronto were relatively progressive. For several summers Lee went to Camp Northland through the YMHA, where the counselors taught the campers Woody Guthrie and labour songs. The era was, for these 12 and 13 year olds, exciting and full of hope for the future:

> The world of fascism had been defeated, the New World was being created, the quarrels of the Cold War hadn't really taken hold, and so there was a lot of optimism and progressive politics among the youth. This contributed to my basically optimistic view that revolution is possible, change is possible, and the condition of oppression under capitalism is not the natural state, not the inevitable state of humankind.

But alongside this enthusiasm, he realized that geopolitical struggles were real and could scar the lives of individuals. He recalls that one wealthy woman who lived in the exclusive Rosedale neighbourhood invited him and his parents to her home to meet Paul Robeson, who made a lasting impression on them. He followed Robeson's

> …epic battles with the Immigration and Naturalization Department…we weren't in Vancouver, but we heard about when he came to Blaine, Washington and they wouldn't let him travel out of the U.S. into Canada, and so he stood on the US side at the Peace Arch and gave a concert across the border for several thousand people who had gathered on the Canadian side.

Because of their involvement in progressive causes, the dynamic in his natal family was less transnational than internationalist. His mother held Canadian citizenship (in those days, a British passport) while his father retained landed immigrant status until some 40 years later, when he became a dual citizen. As an adolescent in the 1950s Lee considered New York the place to go, but gradually the strengths of the Canadian way of life began to grow on him. Inspired by the political message of Tommy Douglas, pioneer Canadian socialist, and given that all American 18 year olds had to register for the draft, he applied for and was granted Canadian citizenship in 1956.[3]

Although he had no call to become an anthropologist in those days, the politics of culture and race as they permeated Lee's community and family, prefigured an abiding opposition to racism and the denial of agency and cultural creativity to those deemed socially inferior. As he puts it,

> In this progressive Jewish milieu, there was always a strong presumption that, for example, people of color were an oppressed minority,…that out of their suffering has come some of the most important cultural productions of history.

His love of folk music, blues and jazz was fostered by his 10-year career through high school and university playing drums in various bands around Toronto, selling his drum set only when it came time to go off to graduate school.

One of his favourite authors at the time was Howard Fast, whose book *Freedom Road* on Reconstruction in the U.S. South helped to shape his ethics and sense of human agency:

> …the world was a mess, but the people were strong and were going to rise…oppression couldn't go on indefinitely because…the righteous anger of the people would rise up—this was my childhood view of the world.

His simple sense of right and wrong would be challenged by what was for his family—and his father especially—a cataclysmic event: the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, when Khruschev denounced Stalin's crimes. The "fairly uncritical" discussions of the USSR that had been part of his childhood ceased abruptly. While his mother's politics had always appeared to be more "pragmatic, less ideologically driven" than his father's, as a young man of nineteen Lee saw his father become deeply disillusioned:

> One of the things I took from that time period…was that one must never allow oneself to become so ideologically trustful and ideologically driven that one could find oneself in a situation where your world could collapse…because everything, everything you had believed in was a sham. Science, with its reliance on empirical evidence and verifiability, offered a more intellectually satisfying alternative.

The unmasking of Stalin's repression, he recalls, did not embitter his mother:

> She would say, "Well, I still believe in the basic goodness of humanity, and I still believe in the basic truth of the underlying principles, but we have to see how they could go so horribly wrong with Stalin."

He remembers repeatedly arguing at the supper table with his disillusioned father, who would say, "I've had it, I'm going to join the synagogue!"—the ultimate right-wing for a committed atheist. Lee recalls defending the Soviet Union to his father, since despite Stalin's monstrous actions, he recognized the USSR had played the pivotal role in defeating Hitler in World War II.

Lee's maturing sense of cultural politics drew from his upbringing in a leftist milieu sensitive to the influence of race, class, and state oppression on culture creation. His awareness of the dangers of uncritical acceptance of any ideology—even as he remained critical of capitalist society—grew from the critique of the Soviet state that the 1956 Party Congress revelations spurred among leftists throughout the world and which ultimately led to the more vigorous and grounded progressive commitments of the 1960s and 1970s.

Becoming an Anthropologist: The University of Toronto in the 1950s

Richard's family aspired for him to become a lawyer and Lee concurred, until it came time to choose courses for his first year at the University of Toronto. Richard had written a paper on Indian-White relations in Canada before Confederation in grade 13, and opted for an honours anthropology course. The instructor for this pivotal first-year course was Robert C. Dailey, who inspired Richard to go into anthropology. As it turns out, Dailey had the same influence some eight years later on Harriet Rosenberg, who some 16 years in the future would become Richard's life companion and many years after that, his wife. Dailey's approach was Boasian, weaving the physical, the social and the archaeological into the course. Dailey's discussion of his fieldwork among the Inuit of Rankin Inlet (west coast of Hudson's Bay) sparked Richard's abiding concern with foraging societies. Halfway through the term, Lee told his parents he was going to go into anthropology. He recalls his father saying, "Can you make a living at that? Can you really make a living at that?" but soon "coming around"; his mother was supportive from the outset.

Lee's subsequent training in kinship and social organization brought him under the tutelage of one of Meyer Fortes' former students, Canadian anthropologist R.W. Dunning, who at the time was writing and sharing with his students the volume that would become a classic in Canadian anthropology, *Social and Economic Change among the Northern Ojibwa* (1959). Dunning was not reluctant to reveal to his classes his deep mistrust and dislike for the bureaucracy. To him the Department of Indian Affairs was bent on destroying Indian culture, whom the local peoples had to resist in order to survive. Largely due to Dunning's influence, Lee's first field research was with Northern Ojibwa on the north shore of Lake Superior. Still in his second year, Richard grew closer to Professor Ronald Cohen, whom he knew slightly through interlaced family networks; Cohen's field research was in Bornu, an emirate in northern Nigeria. Unlike Dunning, whose training under Fortes would have eschewed such theorizing, Cohen was a social evolutionist. He introduced Lee to the works of Leslie White and Julian Steward, and urged Richard and other students in the cohort to do field research in Africa.

At the University of Toronto in the 1950s, Lee recalls reading Wittfogel's work and being more influenced by Steward than White. Although his immersion in the Marxian tradition shaped his political consciousness, Lee also embraced the "scientism" of Julian Steward's "cultural ecology"; he would not include Marx's work explicitly in the construction of his theoretical apparatus until the 1970s. Among the British anthropologists taught at the university, Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard figured larger than others. Among U.S. anthropologists, Richard found the early work of Marshall Sahlins intriguing, but was most influenced by Eric Wolf's *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Wolf, 1959), and the work of Steward's more historically grounded former students such as Morton Fried and Sidney Mintz.

Thus, Lee's early theoretical framework was social evolutionist, but with a concern for understanding kinship and social organization as dynamic rather than fixed, due largely to colonial histories and confrontational processes that involved community attempts to sustain ways of life in the face of state incursions. These aspects would make Lee's social evolution distinct from that of Steward and others, since his concern for history as process and local resistance subverted the view of the forces of production as the motor of history favoured by Wittfogel and White.

After doctoral studies at Berkeley with Sherwood L. Washburn, Robert Murphy, and J. Desmond Clark, Lee first conducted field research in the Kalahari in 1963. He was part of a loose international coterie of academics studying hunters and gatherers in the last decade of British rule in southern Africa.

Contributions to Ethnological Theory

Lee's earliest writings, from the late 1960s to the latter half of the 1970s fit comfortably into a framework that emphasized the cultural framing of environmental use, a four-fields approach to cultural ecology, the cultural dimensions of production and reproduction, and historically attentive social evolution. Lee noted that the foragers spent considerably less time in "subsistence" than was typical of workers in industrial capitalist societies. He stressed the ways that their far-flung kinship networks, flexible group membership and patterns of sharing and exchange buffered local groups against the vicissitudes of seasonality and drought. Implicitly, he argued that in the long sweep of history, want was less a result of environmental scarcity than of evolving human relations that limited access to necessary resources and led eventually to the permanent inequalities of state societies. Hence the appellation, "Original Affluent Society" (see Solway and Susser, this volume), emerged for groups such as the San.

In contrast to some of the other articles in *Man the Hunter* (Lee and DeVore, 1968), Lee's contribution did not focus exclusively on men's hunting contributions to the food supply, but emphasized subsistence activities of both women and men as contributing to the adequacy of the diet and availability of greater leisure time even amid "scarce resources" in a desert environment (Lee, 1968).

While Lee's evolutionism at that time had more in common with Julian Steward than Marvin Harris, he was critical of Steward's "composite band" versus "family band" typology for hunter-gatherers, suggesting, based on the !Kung case that these are better seen as seasonal variations (Lee, 1972a). Even so, one senses a tension in his article on group composition and in those on fertility and reproduction (Lee, 1972b), and subsistence strategies among foragers (Lee, 1972c). Lee's work in this early period emphasizes how successful the strategies are: we do not find here the techno-environmental motor force of history that we see in other social evolutionist writings of the era (Lee, 1968).

His changing choice of terms for the people with whom he worked reflects a growing sense of how apartheid and colonialism influenced the very naming of a people: the uncritical adoption of the common usage of "Bushmen" in the 1960s is followed by the transition to the more respectful term "San" in the early 1970s, and in the late 1980s, to the self-appellation "Ju/'hoansi." Each refinement reflects the development of a stronger indigenous rights movement worldwide, and the reassertion by local peoples of their persistent identities. In this way and even in the early work, he brings changing interactions with surrounding peoples into the arguments. Lee never ignored historical dynamics, pointing out the relations of the !Kung with the incoming Herero and Tswana in different regions, while emphasizing the deep historical depth of San occupation in the Kalahari relative to other peoples (Lee, 1972c).

Tracing his trajectory as a scholar from the early to the late 1970s demands that we see Lee's growing attention to gender, on the one hand, and mode of production debates, on the other. He never loses his concern with the ways people construct their usable environments, and what is now called political ecology. In short, while Lee's theoretical armature becomes more subtle and more explicitly linked with indigenous rights, feminism, and a critique of capitalism, his appreciation of the holistic nature of anthropology remains important: his work iterates the centrality of a four fields approach, with culture at the core.

Gender and Egalitarianism in Foraging Societies

In our conversations Lee stated that his development as a scholar owes more to the influence of Marxist feminist work than any other corpus of scholarship; he is one of the few senior male ethnologists that acknowledge such influence. Because his ethnographies on the San are so widely read in U.S. and Canadian universities (see Lee, 2003a), generations of women and men have become attentive to gender dynamics and structures that challenge patriarchal paradigms.

The early 1970s saw the emergence of Marxist feminist anthropologists who interrogated the theorizing of sex roles and reproductive institutions among peoples in precolonial and marginalized capitalist settings (Gough, 1968; Leacock, 1954; 1972; [Brodkin] Sacks, 1971; 1976; Siskind, 1973; 1978). Together with the British feminist Marxist critique of *Precapitalist Modes of Production* (Edholm, Harris and Young, 1977; Hindess and Hirst, 1975), these writings presented ways to integrate cultural dynamics and human agency with a concern for the structures that shape production and social reproduction, without sacrificing history or gender politics. Lee brought a range of such Marxist feminist influences to his writings beginning in the late 1970s, notably in *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society* (Lee, 1979).

Unlike many ethnographers in the 1960s and early 1970s, Lee's early writings discussed the division of labour by sex and the role women played in production

and reproduction among the San. Through the descriptions one can see the enactment in everyday life of what constitutes comparable worth of women and men in the San foraging context. Especially since the early 1970s, he highlights the voices of actors shaping local communities, through a language of rough joking and banter that helps to reproduce non-hierarchical relations (Lee, 1992b). This central ethos was later given the label "complaint discourse" by Harriet Rosenberg in her studies of Ju/'hoan aging and caregiving (Rosenberg, 1997).

He and Irven DeVore drew Marjorie Shostak into their volume on Kalahari foragers, which premiered Shostak's exploration of one woman's perspective on girlhood among the San (Shostak, 1976), later emerging as the classic life history *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Shostak, 1982). Through his co-operation with and encouragement of other researchers on the San, Lee avoided stereotyping gender relations among the various groups in the Kalahari.

Lee's concern with gender was anticipatory of what became the study of the cultural construction of masculinity. "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari" begins as a "cultural misunderstanding" piece, but soon delves into the gendering of hunting and how !Kung concepts of masculinity eschew the machismo associated with hunting in Euro-American contexts. Contrary to images fostered by "man the hunter" mythologies, Lee shows how the !Kung practice of "insulting the meat" subverts what they perceive as a potential for arrogance that, in turn, might shift into domination and violence within the group (Lee, 1969). In later pieces, Lee explores women's attitudes toward meat and the ways sexual joking plays with hunting metaphors (see, e.g., Lee, 1979).[4]

The Mode of Production Debates

In the late 1970s and 1980s a range of Marxist anthropologists in North America and Europe debated how production and reproduction were articulated in precapitalist social formations—both state and non-state—and in colonial and capitalist industrial contexts. Beginning with the publication of Eric Hobsbawm's reexamination of arguments on modes of production in Marx's *Grundrisse* (Hobsbawm, 1965), orthodox, structural, and dialectical Marxist scholars in the Soviet Union, Europe, and the Americas developed a critical discourse on the role of culture and agency in the transformation of political economies and the social formations associated with them. Among the debates that emerged was whether or not egalitarian societies existed and persisted in the face of state encapsulation and colonization. Many of these debates took place in the pages of *Critique of Anthropology, Culture, Dialectical Anthropology, Economy and Society* and in the first Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS) organized by Maurice Godelier in Paris in 1978 which Lee and Leacock attended.

Lee's "Is There a Foraging Mode of Production?" appeared in *Anthropologie et société* in 1980 and signaled his first explicit engagement with the precapitalist mode of production debates. *Politics and History in Band Societies*, the collection of CHAGS essays he edited with Leacock, appeared in 1982. Their position in the latter volume emphasizes a historical appreciation of shifting political terrains among foraging societies, the centrality of gender in the analysis if social formations (and not only in terms of social reproduction), and the complex and simultaneous significance of both structure and concerted human agency in social transformation. They also made a larger claim: that egalitarian societies exist, albeit today under genocidal or ethnocidal threat from the expanding world system. Leacock's and Lee's position in their introduction and the essays each wrote for the volume centers on the importance of appreciating local histories. The argument stresses that politics are intrinsic to the reproduction of social relations in foraging societies, that existing "primitive communist" social formations do not conform to liberal notions of equality in their egalitarian relations, and that the reproduction of foraging and other band societies is due to the active engagement of their constituents in changing social and ecological contexts.

Foragers versus the Scholars without History: The Kalahari Revisionist Debate

Lee's long-term field research provides his work with a depth of time and a sense of transformation with processes of colonization, sedentarization, militarization and other issues confronting indigenous peoples that virtually no other ethnographer has framed. In light of his efforts to portray the contemporary issues faced by the San peoples in the region in which he worked, it is astonishing that he was attacked in the late 1980s and early 1990s for romanticizing them and ignoring history (see Wilmsen 1989; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990; see Lee 1992a for his far-ranging response on the controversy and his broadest theoretical statement on contemporary issues across the discipline of anthropology).

With Jacqueline Solway, Lee based his defense of the historical validity of egalitarianism and autonomy among Kalahari foragers on archaeological, ethnohistor-

ical and ethnographic evidence that contradicts the claims of Wilmsen and Denbow of early San subordination under a regional power grid (Solway and Lee, 1990; see also Lee and Guenther 1991). The Solway-Lee argument is not that San had no history, but rather that their insertion into relations of domination by neighbouring polities is rather late and highly uneven, so long as foraging has remained an option. Far from denying dynamism to the society, Lee emphases the social engagement of particular San peoples—on human agency if you will—in reproducing egalitarian relations. Daily practices, evasions and acts of resistance emerge time and again in San efforts to remain autonomous under pressure from surrounding pastoral and sedentarized peoples, as well as recent South African and other state domination (e.g., Lee and Hurlich, 1982). Solway and Lee urged scholars to document the varied histories of the region and the responses of the peoples, instead of imposing a Procrustean bed of an early "world system" for which there is no evidence (Solway and Lee, 1990). The major theoretical point was for them, and for those who sided with them in the face of this virulent attack, that exchange was a universal of human experience and did not automatically translate into political dependency or economic subordination (see also Lee and Guenther, 1993).

Indeed, in moving beyond the Kalahari debate, Lee provides new intellectual life to the notion of primitive communism (Lee, 1992b). The term, he points out, had its origins not so much in the writings of Marx and Engels as it was found in the work of Lewis Henry Morgan who called it "communism in living" (Lee, 1990b). Lee's appreciation of what a real social safety net entails, as a feature of pre-class societies, as distinct from the imagery associated with the current fast-disappearing welfare state apparatus, provides contemporary peoples with a measure of how societies need not replicate the Hobbesian "Warre of all against all" that underlies neoliberal policies and practices.

Parallel to Leacock's and Gailey's essay in the same volume (Leacock and Gailey, 1992), Lee presents relations in primitive communism as more or less equal rather than the hypothetical ideal of equality in the classic liberal sense. Inequities exist, but they are not structural: they are artifacts of personal achievement, skills or talents, or moments in the life course, and are contained and prevented from crystalizing into permanent hierarchies through the normal operation of systems of kinship, production and reproduction. What results from this fundamental security—the right to exist in one's multifaceted social personhood—is not utopian similarity of being, but an individuation that can be explored actively through the life course. In keeping with the work of Stanley Diamond (1974), there is in Lee's continuing appreciation of primitive communism an abiding commitment to indigenous rights. Lee's unromantic view of indigenous rights rejects preservation strategies (see Lee, 2002). His view is that people will continue to make their own histories whether or not they control the conditions in which they must live. Gaining greater control over those conditions is the struggle facing indigenous peoples and their advocates throughout the world (see, e.g., Lee and Biesele, 2002; Lee, Hitchcock, and Biesele 2002).

The Work Today

In 1996 the HIV/AIDS crisis in southern Africa drew Lee to undertake work on the social and cultural aspects of HIV/AIDS. In a region ravaged by the epidemic, Lee expects that the Ju/'hoansi may be less affected by the disease. With Ida Susser he has studied San men's and women's responses to AIDS prevention (Lee and Susser, 2002; 2003). They see a clear link between what may be the Ju/'hoansi's success at keeping the epidemic at bay and the high status of women, contrasting so markedly with women in less gender-equitable settings. In contrast to Namibian and South African township women, who said that they could not ask their male partners to use condoms, Ju/'hoan women and men spoke freely. Ju/'hoan women said that they were willing to ask or teach their husbands about condom use. Otherwise, they said "women could get sick!" Lee and Susser acknowledge however that San people elsewhere in the region working in underpaid or unpaid jobs on farms and ranches and exposed to the gender dynamics of the wider society are at much greater risk of succumbing to AIDS. This brings home the point that fighting AIDS and the struggle for indigenous rights in post-Apartheid southern Africa must go hand in hand (Lee, 2003b). And he continues active research projects in both areas. Richard Lee's lines of ongoing research, combining medical anthropology, indigenous rights, political ecology and social activism, augurs well for the coming decades.

Richard Lee has learned the lesson of !Kung masculinity well: while he is clearly a pivotal figure in anthropology today, he remains an affable sort, an optimistic intellectual: deeply engaged and deeply influenced as a person by the people with whom he has worked for decades. Lee's intellectual generosity has helped colleagues around the world, from politically marginalized scholars labouring under repressive

regimes to marginalized academics at home, and, always, the countless students both graduate and undergraduate. Despite his outspoken stands on issues of the day including U.S. adventures in the Middle East and Israel's continuing occupation of Palestine he has been honoured by two honorary degrees. As an advocate for indigenous rights, his deft weaving of political ecology, social, cultural, historical and medical anthropology gives his argumentation a singular and lasting persuasive force.

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Notes

1 *Yiddishkeit*, literally "Yiddishness," roughly translates as "Jewish lore." The concept is weighted heavily toward the more the humorous and the more political aspects of Eastern European stetl (ghetto) and New World immigrant experiences.
2 All quotes and information in the biographical section are taken from a series of interviews I conducted with Richard Lee in Riverside, California, March 14-15, 2002.
3 Later, when he was offered a job at Harvard University, Lee had to go through the usually bureaucratic entanglement of applying for a "green card," although he had been born in the US.
4 The only other anthropologist at the time who explored this kind of everyday construction of gender in subsistence practice was Janet Siskind in her pioneering study of marginalized indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon (Siskind, 1973).

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