
Subtle Matters of Theory and Emphasis: Richard Lee and Controversies about Foraging Peoples

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Abstract: From the late 1960s onward, two divergent views about human nature came to dominate studies of kin-communal societies. One derives from the liberal views of John Locke (not Thomas Hobbes); the other builds on Rousseau's critique of the liberal contract theorists and incorporates the views of Lewis Henry Morgan, Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels. In the 1970s, the former was associated with the work of Sherwood Washburn and Napoleon Chagnon among others; the latter with the writings of Richard Lee, Eleanor B. Leacock, and Janet Siskind. This paper examines the differences between the two viewpoints; it shows how this dichotomy underpinned subsequent debates about the peoples of the Kalahari.

Keywords: foraging societies, social theory, Kalahari peoples

Résumé: À partir des années 1960, deux visions divergentes de la nature humaine en sont venues à dominer l'étude des sociétés communautaires ou à *parenté*. L'une provient des vues libérales de John Locke (et non Thomas Hobbes); l'autre s'est élaborée à partir de la critique adressées par Rousseau aux théories du contrat libéral et comprend les perspectives de Lewis Henry Morgan, Karl Marx et Frederick Engels. Dans les années 1970, la première perspective était représentée entre autres dans les travaux de Sherwood Washburn et Napoleon Chagnon; la seconde, dans les écrits de Richard Lee, Eleanor Leacock et Janet Siskind. Cet article examine les différences entre ces deux points de vue; il montre comment cette dichotomie sous-tend les débats subséquents sur les peuples du Kalahari.

Mots-clés : sociétés vivant de chance et cueillette, théorie sociale, peuples du Kalahari

When I think about the professional career of my friend Richard Lee, I first think about his contributions to the study of foraging societies and his commitment to the development of a critical, socially engaged, integrated anthropology. Then I think about the controversies and debates in which he has been involved over the years. This is not to say that Richard is a particularly combative person: Feisty perhaps; always ready and eager to engage in critically constructive dialogue and debate; but definitely not combative. He is a person who has held strong opinions at least since our days as graduate students together at Berkeley in the early 1960s. A careful look at those controversies and debates, especially at the theoretical underpinnings and matters of emphasis of their participants, is overdue. It will tell us a good deal about anthropology and its practitioners in the late 20th century. Such an inquiry was, of course, launched by feminist social critic and theorist, Donna Haraway (1978a, 1991; 1978b, 1991; 1989), in the late 1970s, but the particular articles to which I refer and am indebted have rarely been cited by anthropologists. They certainly do not inform our understanding of controversy and debate in late 20th-century, anglophone anthropology, even though they should be required reading in courses that deal with the history of anthropological theory.

Studies of foraging societies in the last half of the 20th century were marked by an adherence to liberal social thought from Sherry Washburn's (Washburn and Avis, 1958: 433-434; Washburn and Lancaster, 1968) "man the hunter" and Sally Slocum's (1971, 1975) "woman the gatherer" to Napoleon Chagnon's (1968) "fierce people" and Ed Wilmsen's (1989) "political economy of the Kalahari." The shared theoretical framework of these writers carries with it a number of assumptions, mostly implicit, that have not been adequately scrutinized. Richard Lee early adopted a Marxist theoretical perspective that contrasted with the liberal viewpoints of his contemporaries. It is my contention that this the-

oretical divide as well as the differences in emphasis and meaning between Lee and the writers building on liberal social thought have underpinned the controversies concerned with foraging communities, their relations with surrounding societies and their place in the modern world. Let us examine how liberal social thought underpins the writings of the authors mentioned above and how their perspectives contrasted with the positions inspired by Marxist and Marxist-feminist social theory that Lee honed and refined over the years.

From the mid-1950s onward, Sherry Washburn elaborated a complex picture of the development of human society. It was underpinned by the idea that the fundamental universal pattern underlying human life was the hunting adaptation. Washburn and Virginia Avis (1958: 433-434) depicted its impact in the following way:

Hunting not only necessitated new activities and new kinds of cooperation but changed the role of the adult male in the group....The very same actions which caused man to be feared by other animals led to more cooperation, food sharing, and economic interdependence within the group.

Washburn and Lancaster (1968: 293-301) elaborated this thesis in the late 1960s. They wrote that

the general characteristics of man...can be attributed to the hunting way of life....It involves divisions of labor between male and female, sharing according to custom, cooperation among males, planning, knowledge of many species and large areas and technical skill....Within the group of nonhuman primates, the mother and her young may form a subgroup that continues even after the young are fully grown. This grouping affects dominance, grooming, and resting patterns, and, along with dominance, is one of the factors giving order to the social relations in a group. The group is not a horde in the nineteenth-century sense, but it is ordered by positive affectionate habits and by the strength of personal dominance. Both these principles continue into human society, and dominance based on personal achievement must have been particularly powerful in small groups living physically dangerous lives. The mother-young group must have been intensified by the prolongation of infancy. But in human society, economic reciprocity is added, and this created a whole new set of interpersonal bonds. When males hunt and females gather, the results are shared and given to the young, and the habitual sharing between a male, a female, and their offspring becomes the basis for the human family.

In this view, “mother-young groups” and “dominance based on personal achievement” are rooted in nature. They persist into human society and become the basis for the sexual division of labour given the purported propensity of males to hunt and kill and of females to forage for plants and to care for their young.

But what is dominance and where does it come from? Elsewhere Washburn argued that aggression was a fundamental adaptation of the entire primate order, including humans, and that social order was maintained by hormonal and neural activity and by learning:

Order within most primate groups is maintained by a hierarchy, which depends ultimately primarily on the power of males....Aggressive individuals are essential actors in the social system and competition between groups is necessary for species dispersal and control of local populations. (Washburn and Hamburg, 1968: 282)

In other words, males engage in dominance behaviour because of their propensity to hunt and kill. They form dominance hierarchies, enter into social contracts when they cooperate around hunting, and make tools to dispatch their prey. Female primates engage in less dominance behaviour; they are more maternal and exhibit parental control over their young; they do not hunt, make hunting tools, or engage in the same kind of cooperative activity as males. They and their offspring are ultimately subordinate to males who order group structures and defend their members. Females are not incorporated into the group on the same basis as males, because they have different capacities. It also means that the inequalities reflected by the continually shifting pecking orders of males and by the subordination of females and their offspring are ultimately rooted in the nature of the primates themselves. In a phrase, social hierarchy and power relations are part of the natural order—something that humans acquired as part of their primate ancestry and subsequently elaborated. Slocum (1971, 1975: 42) remarked perceptively that this construction “...gives one the decided impression that only half the species—the male half—did any evolving.”

As Haraway notes, Washburn’s construction of primate society, nonhuman and human, refracts liberal social theory. His views were not those of Thomas Hobbes who claimed that males and females were equal in the state of nature, and that women only became subject to men after they had children and only through the marriage contract (Pateman, 1991: 55). Washburn’s views resonated with those of John Locke (1690, 1960: 74-76) who constituted the family and the dependence of

a woman and her children on her husband in the state of nature. In spite of his comments on the equality of man, Locke did not believe in the absolute equality of all men either. In *The Second Treatise on Government*, Locke (1690, 1960: 54) wrote that

Though I have said...*That all Men by Nature are equal*, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of *Equality*; *Age* or *Virtue* may give Men a just precedence; *Excellence of Parts* and *Merit* may place others above the Common Level; Birth may subject some and *Alliance or Benefits* others, to pay an observance to those whom Nature, Gratitude, or other Respects may have made due.

Thus, in Locke's view, women were naturally subordinate to men and not all men were equal.

Slocum's conclusions contrasted with those of Washburn and Lancaster. Like Lee (1965, 1968a, 1968b), she emphasized the importance of sharing in the evolution of the human species.

Food sharing and the family developed from the mother-infant bond. The techniques of hunting large animals were probably much later developments, after the mother-infant family pattern was established. When hunting did begin, the most likely recipients would be first their mothers, and second their siblings. In other words, a hunter would share food *not* with a wife or sexual partner, but with those who had shared food with him: his mother and siblings. (Slocum 1971, 1975: 45)

This implied social relations and a division of labor simply unimaginable to Locke whose liberal social theory portrayed or refracted the social arrangements of an emergent agrarian capitalist regime (Wood, 1984).

Neither Washburn and Lancaster nor Slocum, nor Lee argued that sex was the basis of human sociality (Haraway, 1989: 215). This was the position adopted by Napoleon Chagnon and by the sociobiologists who stressed reproduction, reproductive success, inclusive fitness, and sexual selection rather than the social relations of production, circulation, and use. Chagnon (1979a: 88) wrote that humans "...behave reproductively in the context of defined social groups" and that males compete for mates. He asserted that Yanomamo men claimed to fight over women (Chagnon, 1979a: 87). In his view, given the scarcity of marriagble women among the Yanomamo, the

...competition among males for mates can become a severely disruptive force in the internal ordering of

large, heterogeneously composed villages. One expression that this takes is a tendency for men to represent themselves as aggressively as possible, indicating to potential competitors that affronts, insults, and cuckoldry will be immediately challenged and met with physical force. In addition, displays of masculinity, such as fighting prowess and *waiter* (ferocity) are admired by Yanomamo women, and particularly aggressive men have an advantage both in soliciting the sexual favors of women as well as depressing the temptation of other men to seduce their wives.

Aggressive men, those with power in Chagnon's view, have more children (Chagnon, Flinn and Melancon, 1979: 297) Social relations are cast in terms of a "political economy of sex" among the Yanomamo in particular and human society more generally that is rooted in the inequalities of men *a la* John Locke. Chagnon (1979b: 375) writes that

If we consider polygyny to be a perquisite of leaders and a mark or measure of inequality, then in the world's so-called "egalitarian" societies not all men are in fact equal, at least in so far as their reproductive potential and ultimate biological success are concerned. Polygyny is widespread in the tribal world and has probably characterized human mating and reproduction for the greater fraction of our species' history...Given that natural selection by definition entails the differential reproduction of and survival of individuals, this fact of life—this inequality—is of considerable importance.

At this point, Chagnon breaks with Locke who was concerned with the social relations of production and property rather than with adducing evidence to support arguments about the subordination of women and control of their reproductive capacities. Locke, like Chagnon, already knew the answers to those questions. He assumed that power could not be shared equally by the husband and wife, that the presumed inferiority of women was rooted in nature, and that women were not incorporated into civil society on the same basis as men because they lacked the capacities of strength, mind and civility to become civil individuals (Butler, 1991: 82, 85; Pateman, 1988: 52-54, 93-94).

Chagnon proceeds to develop his argument, focussing not on reproduction, reproductive fitness and sexual selection but rather on attacking liberal and materialist conceptions of history that explained class structures and conflict in terms of control over resources. He continues

This raises the question of the utility of viewing human status differentials largely, if not exclusively, in terms of *material* resources and the relationships that individuals in different societies have to such resources. That the relationship between people and control over strategic resources is central to understanding status differences in our own highly industrialized, materialist culture is insufficient to project these relationships back in evolutionary time and to suggest that all human status systems derive from struggles over the means and ends of production. Struggles in the Stone Age were more likely over the means and ends of reproduction. (Chagnon, 1979b: 375)

On the one hand, and to his credit, Chagnon, unlike many liberal anthropologists, recognized that the social relations definitive of modern industrial capitalism—the capitalist mode of production—were not characteristic of all societies at all times and at all places. On the other hand, he believed that gender relations and gender hierarchies are universal features of all societies regardless of whether they manifest kin-communal, tributary, capitalist, or socialist social relations.

Here, Chagnon, the Cold Warrior, was responding to critics of the Vietnam War, some of whom were influenced by Marxist social theory, and to counter-culture activists who advocated viewpoints ranging from anarchism to the libertarianism of Ayn Rand. Patrick Tierney pointed this out in his book, *Darkness in El Dorado* (Grandin, 2000: 12-14). He described Chagnon's portrayal of the Yanomami in the following manner:

As a Cold War metaphor, the Yanomami's "ceaseless warfare" over women proved that, even in a society without property hierarchies prevailed. Thus, Communism was unnatural because even the most classless societies had pecking orders in reproductive matters. The underlying ferocity and deceit that fueled the Yanomami's successful military strategy also offered a kind of parable: the ruthless Communists were going to win if long-haired hippies did not rejoin the march of Darwin. (Tierney, 2000: 42)

From the late 1960s onward, anthropologists girded in liberal social theory discussed egalitarian foraging societies in terms of the inequalities they presumed to exist among their members. For some, women were naturally subordinated to men. For others, not only were women subordinated to men, but even the men themselves were arranged in pecking orders that refracted their varying abilities to attract and mate with women. During this same period however Richard Lee and others—notably Eleanor Leacock (1954, 1972) and Janet Siskind (1978)—

continually emphasized the importance of sharing in foraging societies. In the *Man the Hunter* volume, Lee (1968a: 31) described the group structure of the Dobe area !Kung in the early 1960s in the following way:

The "camp" is an open aggregate of cooperating persons which changes in size and composition from day to day...The camp is a self-sufficient subsistence unit. The members move out each day to hunt and gather, and return in the evening to pool the collected foods in such a way that every person present receives an equitable share.

He then proceeded to describe the gendered division of labor that existed at Dobe:

A woman gathers on one day enough food to feed her family for three days, and spends the rest of her time resting in camp, doing embroidery, visiting other camps, or entertaining visitors from other camps... The hunters tend to work more frequently than women, but their schedule is uneven. It is not unusual for a man to hunt avidly for a week and then do no hunting at all for two or three weeks. (Lee, 1968a: 37)

Finally, Lee (1968a: 36) pointed out that much of the subsistence work in the Dobe !Kung camp at this time was done by married, young and middle-aged adults, and that the number of non-productive young and old people was large.

The aged hold a respected position in Bushman society and are the effective leaders of the camps...Long after their productive years have passed, the old people are fed and cared for by their children and grandchildren. The blind, the senile, and the crippled are respected for the special ritual and technical skills they possess...

Another significant feature of the composition of the work force is the late assumption of adult responsibility by adolescents. Young people are not expected to provide food regularly until they are married. ... It is not unusual to find healthy, active teenagers visiting from camp to camp while their older relatives provide food for them.

During the 1970s, Lee and others became increasingly more explicit about the Marxist theoretical frameworks that underpinned their research. In their introduction to the *Politics and History in Band Societies*, Leacock and Lee (1982 : 6-7) were quite explicit:

As editors, our own view is that anything less than a dialectical and historical-materialist view of society

ends in distortion; a view we have each elaborated elsewhere....As we see, the strength of the Marxist approach comes to the fore at the level of synthesis. Marxist methodology resolves the conflict between generalizing and particularizing emphases, for it both enables fine-grained analyses of underlying determinant relations in specific instances and articulates these analyses with a comprehensive general theory of human history....

While committed to the importance of historical and cultural specificity, a dialectical and historical-materialist approach requires the search for underlying regularities or "laws." While committed to the significance of social cohesion, the approach calls for definition of the basic disharmonies, conflicts, or "contradictions" within socio-economic structures that impel change....

A dialectical and historical-materialist approach situates a society's center of gravity in the relations and forces of production—the ways in which people necessarily relate to each other in the course of producing and reproducing life. It necessitates both placing a society fully in the historically specific context of its relationships with its social and geographical environment, and dealing with the complex interrelations and interactions within and between the relations and forces of production on the one hand and the social and ideological superstructures on the other.

This dialectical and historical-materialist approach contrasted with the ones described above that were ultimately rooted in liberal social theory in general and Lockean thought in particular.

After describing the evidence for the relations between men and women in !Kung society, Lee (1982: 39-50) pointed out that these were relatively egalitarian. Age, life experience, personal qualities, and kinship were as important as gender in discussions and group-decision making. There were headmen, but they had no real authority. One man was quite surprised to learn that other individuals in a camp where he had lived considered him to be the headman. These and other facets of everyday life among the !Kung led Lee (1982: 55-56) to conclude that

The fact that communal sharing of food resources and of power is a phenomenon that has been observed directly in recent years among the !Kung and dozens of other foraging groups is a finding that should not be glossed over lightly. Its universality among foragers lends strong support to the theory of Marx and Engels that a stage of primitive communism prevailed before the state and the break-up of society into classes....

Having declared that the foraging mode of production is a form of primitive communism, it would be a mistake to idealize the foraging peoples as nobles savages who have solved all the basic problems of living. Like individuals in any society, foragers have to struggle with their own internal contradictions....The demands of the collective existence are not achieved effortlessly, but rather they require a continuing struggle to deal with one's own selfish, arrogant and antisocial impulses. The fact that the !Kung and other foragers succeed...offers us an important insight.

However, by the late 1970s, Lee (1979: 401-431) was indicating that the tempo of processes barely perceptible a decade or two earlier was increasing. He examined the impact of a number of the processes transforming everyday life for the !Kung: working on cattle posts, planting crops, tending herds, wage work, migrant labour, and penny capitalism. Their effects were compounded in the 1970s by the introduction of schools, increased missionary activity, changes in land tenure, armed liberation struggles in both Namibia and South Africa, and the eventual militarization of the !Kung homelands. As the armed struggle intensified, the !Kung were enmeshed in new structures of power and social relations that were not entirely of their own making.

During the 1980s, Edwin Wilmsen and James Denbow developed a critique of Lee's work (Wilmsen, 1989; Wilmsen and Denbow, 1990). The essence of their critique is that Lee and other Marxists who make use of the concept of primitive communism or the kin-communal mode of production "do not treat forager societies as segments of large social formations" (Wilmsen, 1989: 52). He suggests that the way out of the impasse this creates is to utilize the concept of "the articulation...of formerly colonized peoples in modern nation-states and more broadly in a world system." He proceeds to describe the world system as "a multiple cultural system that incorporates 'mini-systems' such as tribes" (Wilmsen, 1989: 52). He subscribes to Wallerstein's (1974: 347-348) view that "Most entities usually described as social systems—'tribes,' communities, nation-states—are not in fact total systems."

Wilmsen (1989: 52-53) correctly points to the close relationship of Wallerstein's notion of world system with dependency theory and the development of underdevelopment. What these perspectives have in common is that they postulate the existence of a single world economy, an international system of production and distribution, held together by unequal exchange. The developed industrial countries have siphoned capital, raw materials, and labour from the underdeveloped countries that

far exceeded the value of the finished goods the latter were forced to import. In the process, the social formations of the periphery were distorted and transformed. The current world system “is capitalist through and through...” and “one that intensified or invented ‘pre-capitalist’ modes of production to articulate with” (Wilmsen, 1989: 53).

World systems theory and dependency theory are internal critiques of the classical and neoclassical economic models of development and modernization that were popular in the mid-20th century. Like some of the structural Marxist arguments cited with approval by Wilmsen, they are rooted in liberal rather than Marxist social thought. These liberal theories give precedence to exchange and the market rather than to production and the ways in which surplus goods and labour are pumped out of society. They assume that all production is for exchange rather than use and that capitalist social relations are natural. These theories locate the single motor for development—exchange—in the industrial capitalist countries rather than in the underdeveloped periphery; they assert that peoples on the periphery lack agency and the capacity to shape their own history in circumstances not entirely of their own choosing. These theories largely ignore both the violence of articulation and the myriad forms of resistance devised by communities threatened with encapsulation by industrial capitalist states. In a phrase, the analyses that liberal social theorists produce are functionalist rather than dialectical.

Thus, the crux of Wilmsen’s and Denbow’s critique is that they do not like dialectical analyses which challenge the primacy of exchange relations, the dominance of the West, and the inevitability of capitalist expansion across the face of the globe. They imply that people have always been the way they are today and, further, since human nature is fixed, they cannot change. This brings us back, full circle, through the writings of classical economists, like James Steuart and Adam Smith, to the views of Hobbes and Locke, the founders of modern liberal thought.

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