

Culture

Eleanor LEACOCK and Richard LEE (eds.), *Politics and History in Band Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982. 500 pages, U.S. \$59.50 (cloth), U.S. \$17.95 (paper)

Colin Scott



Volume 5, Number 1, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078356ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078356ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Scott, C. (1985). Review of [Eleanor LEACOCK and Richard LEE (eds.), *Politics and History in Band Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982. 500 pages, U.S. \$59.50 (cloth), U.S. \$17.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 5(1), 103–105. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078356ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1985

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

quotas. Wright traces the gradual decline of the harvest quotas on harp seals from 250,000 in 1970 to 127,000 in 1976. He suggests that lowered quotas appear to have stabilized the population and allowed for a slight increase in the harvest levels by 1979. What is puzzling about the recent quotas and lowered harvest levels is that earlier in the book Wright suggests that harvests of 400,000 animals annually were sustained over a twenty-year period from the 1840s to the 1860s (p. 11). In light of these figures, one is not totally convinced that over-exploitation of the herd occurred during the post World War II period. Obviously there is a great deal that is not known about the harp seal.

Environmentalist protests are traced by Wright to the mid-1950s, when two physicians made a film about "inhumane" aspects of killing the pup seals. Canadian naturalists and environmentalists sent observers to the hunts in the 1960s and continued writings which attacked the hunt. According to Wright, concerns about the survival of the seals (given the number of animals being killed) were raised, but more important was the manner in which they were killed (clubbing) in causing public outcry. Wright himself terms the activities "gruesome" and the terms "inhumane" and "barbaric" are repeatedly used by environmentalist observers to characterize the hunt. By the 1970s, a new wave of committed and activist environmentalists attacked the issue using protests on the sealing grounds and support from celebrities to bring the attention of the media to their cause. This strategy, accompanied by a massive protest letter writing campaign, eventually produced an European Economic Community ban on the importation of harp seal pelts in 1982.

In Chapters 3-6, Wright provides an ethnographic description of his sealing trip in 1979. In these chapters he effectively intersperses narrative of his own experiences and feelings with analysis of the characteristics of the men, the structure and economics of the sealing enterprise, and the meaning of the hunt to the Newfoundland sealers.

One of the topics Wright treats well is the socialization methods used by older sealers to bring a younger one into their midst. Wright traces a young boy's transformation from being an innocent schoolboy butt of jokes, to a novice sealer in extreme physical pain questioning his own manhood and the hunt itself, to an experienced sealer who has the hunt "in his blood", i.e. is committed to it as part of his identity.

Wright explores the form of separate reality created on ships and boats by those who work on them. Camaraderie and solidarity develop among

the sealers, built around the shared values of hard work, egalitarian relationships, competence, and mutual self-help. Return to port after the hunt carries with it the opportunity for story-telling and release in the bars, for reunion with loved ones, and for basking in the admiration of fellow Newfoundlanders who understand the difficulties the sealers have endured. It is a world of meaning sculpted by rural workers accustomed to a life that takes a toll but provides its own sense of self-worth and accomplishment.

The final chapter is a faintly embittered description of the demise of the fur seal hunt due to the EEC ban. Implicit are questions about relationships between values and actions and the impact of cultural beliefs on others. The Newfoundlanders' way of life has been dramatically altered by value twists in "la pensée bourgeoise" and the actions based on those twists. There is no question of utility (efficiency or cost) involved in the harp seal question, only meaning and the imposition of the meanings of one group of people on another group who do not share those meanings. The arbitrariness of cultural meanings is perhaps nowhere better portrayed than in the distinctions which "la pensée bourgeoise" has generated to label clubbing of seal pups "inhumane" and "barbaric" while tolerating strangulation of chickens and slaughter of lambs.

Sons and Seals provides a good introduction to sealing and to its meanings to Newfoundlanders, which will be useful to students and scholars of northern and maritime adaptations. But it also provides new data on the important questions about the relationships of values to actions, and the powerful, transformative impact of "la pensée bourgeoise" on peoples around the world who construct meaning differently.

Eleanor LEACOCK and Richard LEE (eds.), *Politics and History in Band Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982. 500 pages, U.S. \$59.50 (cloth), U.S. \$17.95 (paper).

By Colin Scott
McMaster University

Since the earliest conferences devoted to hunter-gatherers in the mid-1960's, there has been growing discontent with the inability of existing anthropological paradigms to address the lines of conflict between small-scale societies and impinging macro-political realities. Concerned in-

dividuals had for some time contributed beyond the mainstream to an early "applied" anthropology. But generally, factors of colonialism and encapsulation by state polities had been bypassed in standard ethnography. In other research, common premises about assimilation or transformation to the "dominant" social relations of capitalism emerged as grimly explicit predictions. These mainstream orientations were complementary in one respect — the scheduled demise of cooperatively organized hunter-gatherers served to reinforce scientific interest in them, and to rationalize a research focus on those zones of their cultural experience which least reminded us of world-scale "-isms". Neither orientation concerned itself pragmatically and directly with the political strategies and circumstances of hunter-gatherers actively surviving in the contemporary world, and both are party to the paradox cited in Rosaldo's contribution to this volume: that the alleged high scientific importance of hunting societies has been in inverse proportion to significant policy favouring their survival under various colonial and state regimes.

In the wake of this legacy, we have begun to emphasize that foraging societies have done surprisingly well in many corners of the modern world. Indeed, the resiliency of foraging societies in complex political environments provides a unifying theme for *Politics and History in Band Societies*, which incorporates a substantial proportion of the papers presented at the international Conference on Hunters and Gatherers in Paris on June 27-30, 1978. The topical and theoretical variations on the theme are diverse, and their pragmatic implications more and less acutely formulated from paper to paper.

The chapters are organized into three sections, focusing respectively on the internal dynamics of forager social relations, on forager-farmer relations, and on contemporary political struggles. The editors' introduction stresses fairly standard Marxist evolutionist concerns theoretically, and asserts the practical importance of demonstrating that collectivist social forms are attainable. The editors are encouraged by international links which have formed between aboriginal peoples' organizations, and by coalitions with various support groups in the metropolises.

In the papers which retain a conventional micro-ethnographic focus, there is an obvious trend away from ecological concerns *per se* toward social relations and the dynamics of their reproduction. Studies by Silberbauer and Lee illustrate egalitarian processes of Kalahari consensus, au-

thority and leadership, including particular attention by Lee to gender relations. Wiessner presents a detailed account of !Kung institutionalized sharing, with preliminary consideration of its transformations in the contexts of agriculture, employment and welfare. There is some particularly engaging discussion of everyday egalitarian practice and its contradictions. A paper by Briggs forcefully illustrates the ambivalent and conflicting human tendencies involved in maintaining Inuit egalitarian values, and Turnbull reveals Mbuti non-aggressivity and non-violence to be outcomes of intense ritual work and play which is life-long.

Land tenure receives important attention, both as a core category in theoretical treatments, and in response to opportunities in Canada and Australia to litigate and lobby for recognition of aboriginal title. Leacock continues to see tendencies toward privatization of usufruct or "ownership" as typical of egalitarian societies which have entered mercantile capitalist relations. Other chapters — by Morris on South Indian Malapantaram and by Bahuchet and Guillaume on Aka Pygmies — provide partial support for the view that commodity production exerts an individualizing influence. But the matter is not as settled as Leacock at one or two points suggests. It is clearly difficult to separate indigenous variations from the effects of varied colonial histories. Hamilton's account of aboriginal land rights in Australia's Western Desert, as well as Feit's contribution on northern Quebec Crees, cite forms of individualized "ownership" or custodianship of resources which are instances of neither private property nor privatized usufruct, but which have frequently been mistaken for such. And the effects of different kinds of commodity production have been by no means uniform across even the cases represented in this volume. Asch and Feit produce evidence from separate ends of the Canadian sub-arctic that fur production was incorporated with relatively little disruption to egalitarian productive relations, over long periods. Vachon provides a Western Desert example of aboriginal communal relations transplanted to the pastoral work-sites of the Australian settler economy, and persisting into the subsequent period of state welfare transfers. Asch is right to the point here in arguing that technologies and mere contact with other more "developed" modes of production do not in themselves produce the erosion and dependency of egalitarian systems. The critical consideration is whether or not hunters are able to reproduce the skills and social relations of their traditional modes of production.

Several of the papers on forager-farmer relations reflect a similar position, in other language. Papers by Vierich and Hitchcock on the Kalahari region illustrate oscillation, rather than uniform acculturation, along a spectrum of hunting, agriculture and wage-working adaptations. These contributors, as well as Chang and Blackburn on East Africa, demonstrate the importance of ethnic designations in relations and movements between economic adaptations. In some areas, these designations are flexible; in others (see Chang) the colonial presence has had the effect of hardening ethnic lines and increasing competition for declining resources. Hitchcock's evidence is that sedentism among hunters occurs not simply because opportunities exist through agriculture and trade, but rather because declining returns force hunters to reduce their mobility.

In recent decades, egalitarian communities in the world's most remote areas have been overtaken by large-scale, resource extractive projects initiated by multinationals and/or state corporations. Posing as they do direct impediments to foragers' control of natural resources, the consensus is that these projects are potentially much more disruptive than participation in earlier commodity production has been. Papers by Peterson, Vachon, Charest, Feit and Asch discuss the responses of

hunters in Australia and Canada to such projects. In developed welfare states, support from unions, the established churches and the general public has given indigenous people significant political leverage. Feit draws our attention to the inconsistencies and debilities inherent in the structure of the modern state, arguing that anthropologists should extend their frameworks to take account of these, and that hunting societies can and do exploit them to control the local effects of macro-political and economic conditions, as well as to reduce dependency by restructuring the relationship of local society to the state. Asch's paper on subarctic Dene and the paper by Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt on the "outstation movement" in Australia assess alternatives for more autonomous economic development based on renewable resources.

There is little indication of success in securing recognition of foragers' land rights in third world areas, where not only mineral extraction but forest removal and other forms of land invasion pose enormous obstacles. In retrospect, it seems unlikely that the prognosis for egalitarian foragers in these areas has ever been poorer. There is some irony, then, in the fact that we are now discovering their vitality; irony, but indication as well perhaps of a will to effective political engagement.