

Book Review: *Ingenious Citizenship: Recrafting Democracy For Social Change*

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Book Under Review

Lee, Charles T. 2016. *Ingenious Citizenship: Recrafting Democracy for Social Change*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016

In this book, the author Charles T. Lee (2016) presents arguments for the recrafting of democracy for social change. By way of introduction, the author analyzes the message produced by the American Ad Council post 9/11 that projects one America comprised of citizens of varying ages, races, national origins, occupations, religions, and gender with “delicate emotive” and “aesthetic effects” emphasizing the US motto “E pluribus Unum” “Out of Many, One” (1). In the same vein, the hiatus in the narrative of “E pluribus Unum” is mentioned: a type of democracy that subsumes racial, class, gender, and sexual differences into a unified citizenry (2). Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant (1997) and Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson (2002), Lee maintains that the type of democracy espoused by the American Ad Council calls for “conservatism, protection and represses any antagonistic struggle staged by dissenting subjects regarding the naturalness of its own self-formation...” (3). The author further postulates that “[f]ocusing on difference, disagreement and contestation from subordinate positions radical democratic politics formulates itself as a critique of the dominant liberal emphasis on social harmony and consensus” (3).

Lee also argues for a re-evaluation of western liberal and progressive thought through which many commentators, scholars, and activists apprehend and conceive the “political.” He calls for a re-examination of the democratic agency and particularly the ways in which it can pre-empt an engagement with forms of agency that are not necessarily democratic, but nonetheless engender fluid configurations for change. He further maintains that it is imperative to seek out the structural roots of social problems and overturn any undemocratic structures of social relations. Methodologically, the author uses the concept of ingenious citizenship and draws on cultural theory, existing ethnographies, qualitative interviews, news reports, films and documentaries, and autobiographical statements, writings, and documents to develop a

critical layering of textual rereading, reinterpretation, and reconstruction in advancing a story of citizenship that is grounded in and informed by the lived experience of the abject (26-27).

Lee's method of critical contextualization is threefold. First, he de-centers political philosophers and theorists and re-centers an eclectic assemblage of object subjects. Second, he de-centers what he refers to as unitary subjectivity and, drawing in part on James Ferguson (2006), focuses on the idea that "what we see depends on what we are looking from" (29). Finally, he argues that the interpretive method cannot be complete without resorting to its own intellectual resources to conduct an alternative interpretation of agency and change. His emphasis, I believe, is on radical democratic change. Significantly, Lee also refers to James Scott's (2012) insight that "the accumulation of thousands or even millions of petty acts can have massive effects on warfare, land rights, taxes and property relations" (xx). Gender and women in particular feature prominently in this study; he refers to Saba Mahmood (2005) who wrote that, "all human beings have an innate desire for freedom" (5) and argues that it is "normative to feminism as it is to liberalism" (Lee 2016, 22).

In chapter one, Lee discusses liberal citizenship as a cultural script which serves two critical objectives. The first is to instruct human subjects on the "normal" way to conduct themselves as citizens in different social spheres and institutions. It is this concept of citizenship that gives liberal democracy its ability to persist and allows for abjection within society – those who do not measure up or conform to the script – for its own constitution. The second is that citizenship is not only a cultural script, but it can also serve as a template to trace how abject subjects inventively and resourcefully disrupt and appropriate the script to generate more inhabitable spaces for themselves. Lee therefore directs his analysis to four major areas where the liberal citizenship script is disrupted and appropriated: migrant domestic workers' workplace tactics against their employers; global sex workers' purposeful abjection of their bodies; trans people remodeling gender identification and sexual practices; and acts of suicide bombing. He argues that ingenious agency shows through prominently in the capacity of these abject subjects who fall through the cracks of conventional citizenship (39).

In the third chapter, Lee devotes attention to the

theme "Global sex workers, calculated abjection and appropriating economic citizenship" (101), which is useful not only for the ingenious citizenship construct, but also issues related to gender. He refers to the relations between "bread" (practicality and survival) and "roses" (aspiration for equality and justice). These two contradistinctive positions "revivify" the politics inspired by female immigrant textile workers during the strikes at the turn of the twentieth century whose slogan was "it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too" (103). Significantly, one of the central questions is whether prostitution demonstrates agency by purposefully using the "shameful" abjection of a woman's body to earn an economic livelihood and allows her to acquire a limited degree of normality in relation to liberal citizenship?

Lee uses the narrative frame of calculated abjection to describe the ways in which sex workers deliberately and intentionally subject themselves to sexual abjection and dishonor in exchange for economic benefits while appropriating more inhabitable spaces. In other words, he identifies the paradox of using stigmatized work to realize social advancement, turning sexual abjection into "a calculated maneuver to fulfill economic ambitions" (108). Historically, he refers to Kamala Kempadoo (1999) who argues that slave women used sexual alliances to achieve emancipation and freedom from oppression. They exploited the colonial masters' exotic fantasies and sexual demands in exchange for money "to purchase their own or their children's freedom or in exchange for manumission" (8).

The fourth chapter focuses on "Trans people, morphing technologies, and appropriating gendered citizenship." With regard to morphing, Lee (2016) describes two streams. The first disrupts the gender script of citizenship by forcing the binary categories male and female to be inclusive of subjects born with the "opposite biological body, thereby stretching and expanding the original meanings of the categories of man and woman"; the second challenges the fundamental binary system of citizenship and creates the right to travel to gender/sexual destinations other than those labeled male or female (185). The final sections of this chapter focuses on activist reorientation: morphing in and out of rights. He references Michelle O'Brien (2013) and argues that "trans politics should not hinge on a fanatical commitment to purity or an attempt at a total refusal to

participate or be complicit in any form of corporate rule, but should instead proceed by interacting with global capitalism, corrupting, redirecting, and redefining the system to serve our ends” (185).

In the fifth chapter, Lee focuses on “suicide bombers, sacrificial violence and appropriating life itself.” He discusses the Palestinian occupied territories and how Israeli citizens have a normalized position in relation to the liberal pursuit of life, liberty and happiness—from which Palestinians are “almost” indefinitely abjected. Drawing on Judith Butler (1993), Lee maintains that “Israeli and Palestinian compatriots are linked through the unequal colonial power relations in the occupied Territories, and they are not only placed in a rejected/eluded outside to the pursuit of liberal citizenship, they are also suspended in an unlivable zone of social life inside liberalism’s narcissistic embodiment” (192).

In the final sections of the book, Lee argues that social transformation requires unlearning internalized oppression, raising political consciousness, and forging oppositional resistance and strategies. All of these endeavors are indispensable and formulate essential parts of the pedagogical struggle for social change. He further argues that “social activism needs to follow like water in the perpetual combat of social justice struggles” (256).

This is a useful work on ingenious citizenship that captures the efforts of the abjected to gain relevance in a neoliberal society. Without their ingenious strategies, the hyper-exploited persons and women in particular would not have survived. Except for its verbosity, this book is one of the most relevant in the field, having engaged with key literature and identified the hiatus in classical and western philosophies. This work is useful for academics, politicians, and anthropologists as well as the larger human community.

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