

John C. Leggett



BORN:

Thursday, September 18, 1930

DIED:

Monday, December 14, 2020

BIRTHPLACE:

St. Clair Shores, MI

John C. Leggett, Professor of Sociology, Dies at 90.

John Carl Leggett, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, died in Seattle, Washington on December 14, 2020. He was 90.

A passionate, dedicated sociologist, scholar, and activist in the causes of social justice, labour rights, and peace and disarmament, he will be greatly missed.

Born in St. Clair Shores, Michigan in 1930 and raised in the greater Detroit area, John served in the US Navy on the USS Midway after WW2, and then became the first person in his family to attend university.

John was a loyal Wolverine (“Go Blue!”), obtaining a B.A. in Political Science and Far Eastern Studies in 1952, M.As. in Political Science and Sociology in 1956 and 1958, and a Ph.D. in Sociology in 1962 at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. While there he met and married Iris, a fellow student, in 1954. Divorced later, they would remain friends.

John began his academic teaching career at the University of Michigan’s School of Social Work as a Lecturer and Research Associate. While there, he helped to found Students for a Democratic Society

(SDS), and supported the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He then joined the faculty of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley in 1962.

In his time at Cal from 1962-66, John became an active faculty leader of the Free Speech Movement (FSM), symbolized by his holding the “Free Speech” banner, an iconic image of the Civil Rights Movement re-published in California Magazine, 2014. He was also an active anti-Vietnam War organizer, and member of the Farm Labor Support Committee at UC Berkeley supporting Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in organizing Mexican farm workers. He interviewed Malcolm X in 1963 after the Birmingham Church Bombing, an interview that has inspired generations of students and civil rights activists.

John then joined the Political Science, Sociology, and Anthropology (PSA) Department at the newly opened Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC, Canada in 1966, soon becoming an Associate Professor. He was also a Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia. He continued to co-organize protests against the Vietnam War, albeit in a country that was not fighting in the war. He was part of the famous faculty/student PSA Strike. As historian Hugh Johnston, a colleague, stated,

"The PSA affair was a crucial part of Simon Fraser University's early history and probably the most notorious conflict on a Canadian campus then or since. It was about radicalism, academic freedom and due process. From the beginning, one side characterized it as a political purge; but it was more complicated than that. At stake was the future of SFU: the direction the SFU adventure would take. The outcome, however, was predictable: the odds were all weighted against professors who went on strike."

He continued to work in California during his time at SFU. He supported labor unions and was a consultant to Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. He taught Black Studies at the University of California, Davis, and was a visiting lecturer at Sacramento State. From a colleague/friend from that time, Alan Wade: “The first time I saw him was standing with a megaphone on the Sac State campus in April, 1968 speaking in the open air to a group of students about MLK [Martin Luther King Jr] and his Poor People's Campaign in Memphis.”

In 1971, he joined the Department of Sociology at Livingston College, a newly opened, innovative, undergraduate component of Rutgers University, that, according to his colleague Norman Markowitz, was “the first race, ethnic, and gender-integrated college at Rutgers” committed to “Strength through Diversity.” He had just come from the University of Connecticut, where he had organized sit-in protests against Dow Chemical as a part of his anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, according to Rutgers colleague Marty Oppenheimer. Livingston College hired him for his passionate activism as well as his intellectual and teaching talents. During his time at Rutgers, he won numerous academic and teaching awards, and was considered to be a popular teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. As one former Graduate student of his, Gregory Metz, remembers: “[He] was a truly authentic person, committed, not at all pretentious, passionate about baseball, jazz, and lots more, a perennial gleam in his eye and his heart, and exceedingly kind to me...during my days on the banks....When I think of John, it’s about a passion for justice, exuberance, and a friend who had my back.”

While at Rutgers, John was an activist in a range of labor-related issues, studying unemployment and occupational health in central NJ, and race and working-class consciousness. He led the successful campaign to remove asbestos from Livingston College’s Kilmer Library when the dangers of carcinogenic asbestos were not yet widely recognized. John also played an important role in fighting

for and publicizing the plight of Johns Manville workers in New Jersey who suffered from the effects of asbestos exposure at work, a struggle that led to the corporation establishing a trust in 1982 to compensate workers. In 2011, the American Sociological Association section on Marxist Sociology honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Another former Graduate student and friend, Jerry Gioglio, remembered his multifaceted contributions to his Rutgers colleagues and his community:

“He was a mentor, guiding me through the tradecraft of 'seat of your pants' Sociology, involving me in his (sometimes our) research, data collection, evaluation and writing.

John took social action seriously and got me and others involved in several causes. I have fond memories of his call for folks to show up outside a local supermarket to show support for the Farmworkers and particularly the Lettuce Boycott. Some Saturdays, only he and I showed up, leafleting, talking with people, getting them to take on the prospects for real change and his unwavering support for working class struggles.”

An active scholar and teacher, John published influential books that focused on the working class. His 1962 PhD dissertation, *Taking State Power: Sources and Consequences of Political Challenge*, was published by Harper & Row in 1973. His further writings include *Class, Race, and Labor: Working Class Consciousness in Detroit* (1968); *Race, Class, and Political Consciousness* (1972); *Allende: His Exit and Our “Times”* (1978); co-author, “The Ideology and Methodology of Employment Statistics” and co-edited *The American Working Class: Prospects for the 1980s* (1979); *Mining the Fields: Farm Workers Fight Back* (1998); *Labour and Capital in the Age of Globalization* (1982). He also wrote the satirical *The Eighteen Stages of Love* (a book that he and his wife, Rutgers Historian and Women’s Studies professor, Lora Dee Garrison) developed in the Erma Bombeck comedic self-analysis genre craze of the 1980s. This quote from John, written looking back on the anti-Vietnam War protests he organized and took part in, encapsulates the passion he had for activism:

“We opposed the Indo-Chinese [Vietnam] War, and we did so with great enthusiasm. We knew what had to be done, and we did it. And we are happy that we told part of the story through *New Politics* while we engaged in direct-action opposition to The War and its architects. The article...captures not just how we waged our struggle, but pinpoints the campus forces we had to confront to help gain United States withdrawal—and to help put an end to the repeated acts of carnage committed against the Indo-Chinese people by our conscripted and volunteer youngsters (many of whom were driven mad and to suicide/homicide through their participation). Knowing then the costs being paid by tens of thousands of our kids—many of whom led our demonstrations as veterans against The War long before it ended—we did our best in 1968–69 to limit both our young soldiers’ injuries and the overseas horrors. Stop The War! We helped do it. God, we’re proud!”

John’s best friend, Louie Nikoladis, remembered him this way:

“We were lifelong protesters of the many outrages of capitalism and imperialism. We often stood on street corners in Highland Park, N.J., holding various anti-war signs, as well as many trips to Washington D.C. to protest. John was a true leftist....I will miss him and his always positive take on the prospects for real change and his unwavering support for working class struggles.”

John was the recipient of many awards, including: Ford Foundation Fellow (1954-1955); Grantee, Social Science Research Council (1960-1961; 64); Canada Council (1968-1970); Trans-Action

Research Grantee, 1984-1985; Rutgers Distinguished Faculty Person Award, Livingston College Association Graduates (1987); Alfred McClung Lee Award; Sociological Abstracts and International Sociological Association Award (1994); recognition in the Rutgers Upward Bound Program; Outstanding and Dedicated Service to the Ronald E. McNair Program (2006). He became an Honorary Member of the Livingston Alumni Association Rutgers in 1987. John received an award from the AAUP for his extensive union work at Rutgers. He was named to Marquis' Who's Who in America list in 1995.

After teaching at Rutgers for 33 years, he retired in December 2004 and became Professor Emeritus in 2005.

He was an inspiring scholar, teacher, colleague, and friend. John later married Lora Doris "Dee" Garrison, a Professor of History and Women's Studies at Rutgers, who predeceased him. He was deeply attached to Dee, his children and grandchildren, his dogs, and his friends. John was known for his humanity, wit, and radiant spirit, as well as his scholarship and activism. His daughter Shannon once spoke about him this way, "My dad's like a waterfall. He keeps flowing with information. Every now and then, a thirsty hiker comes by and takes a little drink. But regardless, he just keeps flowing."

Throughout his life he had many passions, including sports. He was a natural athlete, with a deep love for hockey, baseball, playing softball (with his Rutgers Wobblies team for many years), paddling (whitewater canoeing, kayaking), and hiking at high altitude, in the Canadian Rockies as well as many different peaks in California, including having climbed Mt. Whitney (the highest peak in the 48 continental US states) several times. His nephew, Mike Mulier, remembered, "My Uncle Carl challenged me to a long adventure across Chilliwack Lake in kayaks, each of us going solo for a five mile journey. Kayaks, water and fishing is today, with my wife, a huge part of our recreation and existence...Ultimately, in my eyes, my Uncle Carl was the family phenomenon growing up in the working-class Detroit area, educated to the highest degree, teaching and advocating for the rights of the people...A kind, colorful and wildly imaginative man."

From his Epitaph:

Sociologist - Scholar - Teacher - Mentor - Civil Rights Activist

Paddler - Mountaineer - Baseball/Hockey Player

Loving Father/Grandfather/Husband/Colleague/Friend

A lifetime of laughter, love, and great Irish craic

"The mountains are calling, and I must go." (John Muir)

He will be sorely missed.

He is survived by his daughters, Britt Leggett of Seattle, Washington, and Shannon Leggett of North Vancouver, BC, Canada; his stepson, Tray Garrison, of Riverside, California; his sister, Noreen

Mulier, his brother Donald Leggett, and their children/grandchildren of St. Clair Shores, Michigan; and his grandchildren, Marie Leggett-Vasilieva, Travis, David, and Troy Garrison.

In lieu of flowers and gifts, please consider making a donation to the Rutgers Sociology Gift Fund in Memory of Professor John C. Leggett (funds will be given to like-minded undergraduate and graduate students in his name) <https://sociology.rutgers.edu/support>