

Culture

RICHARD F. SALISBURY, REFLECTIONS ON THE INTEGRITY OF THEORY AND PRAXIS

Harvey A. Feit



Volume 10, Number 1, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080928ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080928ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

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

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Feit, H. (1990). RICHARD F. SALISBURY, REFLECTIONS ON THE INTEGRITY OF THEORY AND PRAXIS. *Culture*, 10(1), 9–12. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080928ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1990

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/>

tion: he insisted that development agencies, private firms or governments not simply clobber local people, but that those who were to be affected by development be given the knowledge and the coaching to wage a fair fight for themselves. The approach worked well, in New Britain off new Guinea, in Bougainville, in Guyana, in James Bay and across the Canadian north. In his writings on the role of the anthropologist in development situations we see him laying down the rules for fair fights and for good coaching.

Dick's approach to building institutions, whether the multitude of anthropological organizations he constructed or the administrative units he worked in here at McGill, also had its pugilistic inspirations. Dick always sought to find the openings, take advantage of the right moments, feint and jab, and above all never to back down from challenges. An entrepreneur, he always stepped in to new opportunities, never away from them. Impatient with methodicalness and grand planning, he preferred to win points where he could find them, and to go on to seize new ground rather than rest on the point already won. So he stepped in to take on the immense job of chairing the program of the XIth International

Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, he saw the need to direct the Center for Developing-Area Studies at McGill at a critical moment, and he achieved growth in the Faculty of Arts — point by point, a quarter or a half a position at a time — when many of the rest of us were feeling that nothing could be done.

Those of us who were privileged to be his colleagues in the McGill Department of Anthropology knew that he was not just the founder of our Department but its central pillar and primary illumination. What distinctiveness and distinction we have, as a Department built around the study of social change and development, we owe largely to Dick's leadership. By his many seminal writings, his stature in anthropology is assured; his stature as a colleague and as a human being will be assured in the impression he has left on all of us as a championship player on the side of social science, humane development, and respect for one another.

NOTE

The author is indebted to Mary Salisbury for conversations upon which this reflection is based.

RICHARD F. SALISBURY, REFLECTIONS ON THE INTEGRITY OF THEORY AND PRAXIS

Harvey A. Feit
McMaster University

In the midst of an academic world which has become increasingly specialized, increasingly skeptical of claims to sound knowledge and wisdom, and increasingly ambiguous about the role of scholars in the wider world, Richard Salisbury stood out. He stood out in part because he did not reflect these trends. He always had an intellectually rigorous point of view, a commitment to what he thought was right, and a passionate activism in the service of other people and peoples. He was a scholar who deeply affected those who had the opportunity to know or work with him, students and colleagues.

Richard Salisbury pursued an exceptionally productive career as a scholar, teacher, administrator, applied social scientist, and public figure. Yet, the generosity with which he gave his skills and resources to others was truly exceptional. As a teacher, his pedagogical style was an uncommon but effective combination of intellectual clarity, incisive

knowledge of the subject, and a gentle frankness. What was fascinating to me was how he upheld high standards of excellence yet encouraged creative learning. He had an unusual capacity to contribute to the scholarly work of students by showing the student that they had done more than they thought, at the same time as suggesting that they had done less than they were capable. He cultivated this disjuncture, using supportive yet incisive critical advice in order to clarify assumptions and present alternative formulations which opened students to new insights.

I will never forget my first extended scholarly encounter with him in a graduate school setting. He served as the initially anonymous evaluator of my Masters Thesis. Most of his roughly-typed page of comments were straight forward and generally encouraging, but his final paragraph took my breath away. He started out by simply stating that I had

reached the wrong conclusion. He said that all my evidence actually pointed to the conclusion I had rejected, along with numerous scholars before me. When I caught my breath, refocused my attention, and read carefully, he had shown how my analysis was based on overly simple assumptions about social action, whereas if I adopted more sophisticated models, the analysis led to truly new conclusions. He concluded his comments by claiming that what he had suggested just followed from what I had already done. From my point of view, it looked more like he had pushed me through a major breakthrough in my thinking, as well as showing me an exciting scholarly contribution.

The admiration and high esteem in which Richard Salisbury was widely held was in part a reflection of this profound respect and commitment he gave to others. I know that several of us would not be in the profession were it not for his guidance and support, sometimes in difficult circumstances. My own involvement in applied work with the James Bay Cree, while still a degree candidate and a junior professor, was always supported despite the major delays it caused in completing my dissertation. It put Richard Salisbury under substantial pressure, and it must have caused him considerable concern. But he never spoke of that to me, he only spoke of his sympathy for the pressures I was under.

His understanding reflected his own career, which combined a devotion to intellectual rigour with a passionate activism. His blending of these two commitments defined a profound personal and professional integrity. This intellectual and applied synthesis also constitutes one of the truly distinctive features of his work. I think that he extended this synthesis to a richness rarely attempted in contemporary anthropology. Richard Salisbury showed anthropologists the value, and sometimes the necessity, of linking general theoretical formulations to applied anthropological analyses. He demonstrated that anthropologists can seek theoretical or applied objectives by pursuing both in dialectical process. At a more intimate level, he showed that such linkages provide the foundations for a distinctive professional integrity.

It is common in anthropological writing about the careers of scholars to assume that the applied activities of anthropologists have a marginal relationship to their academic concerns. In general, our histories of the discipline ignore the applied concerns of scholars. Where anthropological accounts do treat the relationship between applied activities and scholarly practice, we tend to either relegate consideration of applied work to a separate section of the study, removed from the scholarly and historical

analysis of the scholar's theoretical and empirical endeavours; or we tend to use applied endeavours as an analytical indicator of the broader social or political values of a scholar, in order to help us understand his or her theoretical positions.

From the point of view of social analysis, we know that such a radical separation between arenas of human action is not a feature of human social agency which can be taken for granted. The value of viewing and analyzing everyday cultural and social life through the concept of holism is one of the central assertions of anthropology. A recurrent theme in our writing about small scale societies is the claim that generally there is no radical separation of one domain of thought and practice from another. This holism of human social life plays a central role in analyses from diverse theoretical and ideological persuasions. It is therefore surprising that in our accounts of the life and work of anthropologists we do not often use the concepts of holism or integrity for either descriptive or explanatory purposes.

However, it is essential for us to look for integrations rather than separations in order to appreciate some of Richard Salisbury's distinctive accomplishments. I think Richard Salisbury lived and worked in a way that sought to express and demonstrate the connections between professional, political, economic, moral, family, and spiritual engagements. He made visible the special personal and social fulfillment that flows from these connections in our own lives. He sought to develop a framework for anthropological praxis within the scholarly milieu that encouraged such integration. And he sought to address society from the assumption of the inter-relatedness of actors and agencies. This way of working pervasively informs his writings, his applied projects, and the institutional developments he nurtured.

We can see elements of this integration in his writings on development and on anthropology itself, especially his views of the role of the anthropologist. A central theme of Richard Salisbury's writings has been the promotion of linkages between the theories of socio-cultural anthropology and the analytical problems of applied anthropology. He has strongly argued for the value to each from this interaction, citing examples from his own experience contributing to economic theory and transactional analysis (as in his article, "Application and Theory in Canadian Anthropology: The James Bay Case," 1979). And he suggested that such linkages bind the social scientist to the wider society in ways that engage both professional knowledge and pluralistic values, a view he conceptualized in the role of the anthropologist as "societal ombudsman" (1976).

These conceptions follow directly from his widely cited studies of economic anthropology and development in which he considered the social, political and cultural components of development processes (From Stone to Steel, 1962 and Vunamami, 1969). While his work was addressed to debates within economic and social anthropology, it was also directed to development planners and applied social scientists, addressing theoretical issues at the same time it stood as a critique of development economics as it was commonly practiced.

These concerns were later extended to work in northern Canada where Richard Salisbury elaborated his praxis, and extended the linkages, by undertaking consultancies with and for indigenous peoples' organizations, and by entering into public policy debates as a citizen and scholar. In his initial work on the James Bay Hydro-electric scheme he demonstrated the utility of economic decision-making models for Quebec development planners, elaborated his theory of decentralized development through the subsistence and service sectors, addressed critical negotiating issues for the regional Cree leadership, and entered into the public policy debates over the proposed hydro-electric project and its impacts (for example, see *Development and James Bay: Social Implications of the Hydroelectric Proposals*, 1972).

His recommendations to the government developers called for significant changes in their plans for how the hydro-electric development should proceed. His arguments were based on his earlier experience and on the world-wide development literature, and he convinced the government agencies to significantly alter these plans. The changes included new initiatives for local involvement, recognition of the need to support the subsistence sector, the recognition of a local role in plans for development of service industries, as well as relocating and isolating camps and staging areas away from indigenous settlements, and creating a local priority for on-the-job training programmes. For the Cree the report emphasized the consequences of demographic growth, the vital but limited potential for the growth of subsistence hunting activities, the need to upgrade job skills in the population, the need to evolve region-wide planning, and the critical importance of political rights and effective organization for social and economic development. He was one of the very first advisors to recommend that the Cree challenge the hydro-electric project by taking out a court action based on claims to aboriginal rights.

The importance of legal rights and the view that subsistence production is and should continue to be

central to northern indigenous societies as they undergo changes were views being expressed by the elders and young people from the communities. As a consequence, indigenous peoples made the issues into a matter of national political and media attention in Canada, through both the James Bay court cases and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. Richard Salisbury's pioneering studies served as an important analytic statement and demonstration of the plausibility and necessity of regionally decentralized economic development and of recognizing indigenous rights as a critical political component of effective economic development. Richard Salisbury was a widely sought expert by the media on these issues, and he wrote public contributions to these critical debates.

Richard Salisbury was passionately concerned to both learn from indigenous people's knowledge and practices and to carry their arguments for greater autonomy and decentralized development back to urban and industrial centres. His support for indigenous and third world peoples, and his reasoned and rigorous research and arguments in support of their claims, sought to complement and enhance their own initiatives. But he also sought to inform them of insights which social science perspectives could contribute to their success. In the James Bay situation he arranged seminars and meetings, and prepared several limited circulation reports, addressing the regional indigenous leaders and offering insights into upcoming problems and potential directions for solutions. In the process, he became a valued friend to many in the Cree communities.

These applied initiatives led to a series of projects on aspects of long-term development in the James Bay region, undertaken by Salisbury and by a diverse group of colleagues and students working with him. Taken together, their studies and reports constitute one of the major documented case studies in the social science literature of the processes of large-scale, long-term change, and one of the best known examples of applying anthropology. They go some way towards redefining the role and practice of applied anthropology in Canada and beyond.

The integration which Richard Salisbury sought is clear in his last book, in which he drew the results of these projects together, *A Homeland for the Cree: Regional Development in James Bay, 1971-81* (1986). This book represents a particularly ambitious undertaking. Addressed to all of the sectors engaged in development, local indigenous peoples, academics, government planners, and politicians, it shows each specialized audience the connections between its

focussed concerns and holistic responses. In attempting and accomplishing this, it foregoes some of what could have been accomplished by four different books and reports. By finding a voice and a language with which to speak with coherence to many readerships, it accomplishes what four separate publications could never have undertaken, to make the connections. The study provides a bold and innovative model for continued elaboration. Richard Salisbury's death denied him that opportunity. But the essence of the possibility for a renewed professional integration was exemplified in his career, his teaching and his writings.

The qualities which are at the center of Richard Salisbury's contributions to the discipline, and which would form a key to any full assessment of his work, are this personal integrity, intellectual rigour, and social concern, and the unique unity and balance he gave these throughout his career and in his dealings with others. It is this integrity which was one of his most extra-ordinary intellectual and practical accomplishments, and it forms a core of his intellectual legacy.

He showed that the personal and moral commitments we hold can be integrated with scholarly and professional obligations. He showed that truth and morality are joined, and that service to fellow humans is coincident with individual fulfillment. He encouraged a vision and a commitment in others

to seek to fulfill these human potentials. He showed that the seamless holism of domains of thought and action, which philosophers associate with the roots of the human condition, and which anthropologists associate with many of the small scale communities which we study, can also be created in our own midst in the contemporary world.

References

SALISBURY, RICHARD F.

1962 *From Stone to Steel: Economic Consequences of a Technological Change In New Guinea*, Melbourne, Melbourne and Cambridge University Presses.

1969 *Vunamami: Economic Transformation in a Traditional Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

1976 *The Anthropologist as Societal Ombudsman* in David Pitt, (ed.) *Development from Below*, The Hague, Mouton.

1979 *Application and Theory in Canadian Anthropology: The James Bay Case*, *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 17:212-225.

1986 *A Homeland for the Cree: Regional Development in James Bay, 1971-1981*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press.

SALISBURY, RICHARD F., ET AL.

1972 *Development and James Bay: Social Implications of the Hydro-electric Proposals*, Montreal, McGill University Programme in the Anthropology of Development Monograph Series.

Richard F. Salisbury (1926-1989): la passion de l'application des connaissances.

Gilles Bibeau

Université de Montréal

Bien des anthropologues pratiquent leur métier toute leur vie durant sans jamais essayer d'appliquer leurs connaissances à la solution des problèmes qui se posent dans les sociétés où ils travaillent. Chez Dick, ce fut là au contraire une préoccupation continue, et ce depuis son premier travail en Nouvelle-Guinée, dans sa recherche moins connue sans doute mais fort stimulante d'analyse institutionnelle réalisée dans un hôpital psychiatrique de Boston au début des années 60, ainsi que dans ses recherches et interventions des années 70 et 80 auprès des populations amérindiennes du Canada, et plus spécialement auprès des Cree de la Baie James. Ce sont les phénomènes de transformation sociale et de dynamique culturelle qui ont véritablement passionné

Dick: il a de tout temps manifesté dans sa pratique anthropologique le souci de mieux comprendre de quelle manière l'adoption ou l'imposition par la force d'un style de vie occidental contribuait à modifier l'architecture globale des sociétés traditionnelles, y faisant apparaître des problèmes nouveaux face auxquels les populations se sentaient souvent démunies.

Quel que soit le problème social, économique ou culturel que Richard Salisbury ait contribué à solutionner comme chercheur ou comme consultant, il semble l'avoir fait en s'inspirant tout au long de sa carrière d'un cadre conceptuel qui intégrait trois idées forces. En bon fonctionnaliste déçu des per-