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Some Thoughts on Regional Development and the Canadian North in the Work of Richard F. Salisbury

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Some Thoughts on Regional Development and the Canadian North in the Work of Richard F. Salisbury

Colin Scott

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I enrolled at McGill for graduate studies in anthropology in 1976, drawn mainly by the work of Dick Salisbury and his students at the Programme in the Anthropology of Development on issues confronting the James Bay Cree. The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, the first comprehensive settlement of a modern aboriginal claim in Canada, had recently been concluded. I had gained some limited experience with indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan and southern Venezuela, and was interested in how hunting societies could oppose the deleterious effects of metropolitan development. An anti-development rhetoric that combined elements of Indian rights activism, neo-Marxism, and environmentalism had already strongly shaped my outlook.

As Dick let me know in our very first conversation, he thought that my view of the politics of development was overly polarized. He insisted that although development meant different things to different social actors, the differences were not as irreconcilable as I imagined. He pointed out that northern native people wanted many of the things valued in EuroCanadian culture, but on terms that would allow continuity of their own traditions. Development was not a zero-sum competition for a limited good; there were ways for all parties to come out winners.

I thought Dick's view of the world was too optimistic, assumed too much liberal *decency* on the part of social actors; and I certainly let him know. If this ever taxed his patience, he never lost his humour. He was adept at seizing the right opportunity

to inject an unsettling comment, question, or fact that as often as not left me with the feeling that *he* was the realist, not I.

Human values were incontestably the heart of Dick's enterprise. In seminars, he defined development as social change that enhanced the circumstances of life from the viewpoint of the local participants. Development, furthermore, must improve participants' ability to control those circumstances, and must respect participants' wishes for continuity as well as innovation. Decision-making, he wrote, "should be ideally in the hands of the people affected by the decision, but in practice be decentralized to as low a level in any organization as possible (1972a:5)."

On strategy, Dick's position was clear: "confrontation doesn't get you anywhere" — words heard more than once as we discussed current events in Indian politics. His approach was transactional, that each party be able to formulate its position in the best possible knowledge of the perceptions and expectations of others, and that out of such transactions the structure of future relationships could be influenced for the better (1977a, 1979b). This, he felt, could result in development without jeopardy to the autonomy of any party to the process. He expected that people could be convinced to take the interests of others into account, in their own long-term interest. Of the James Bay case, he wrote:

The challenge to the anthropologist — concerned with cultural and sub-group differences, was one of showing what were the different pay-offs to different sub-groups, of a solu-

tion that was acceptable to all. Some parties may not have obtained the maximum that they might have obtained from a purely self-centred strategy, but that would have been at the expense of other sub-groups and, we would argue, also to their own long-term disadvantage, as they would have alienated the parties whom they would have "oppressed". Over the long term, there would have been major strife in the area" (1983a:17).

To show how all parties could benefit from a non-antagonistic transaction of their own interests in relation to others — this was the professional as well as the ethical standard that Dick preferred.

Anthropologists seeking change needed to direct their attention simultaneously to micro- and macro-levels in the development process. A major finding of contemporary anthropology, Dick felt, was that understanding and changing any social situation "requires a knowledge not only of the internal dynamics of the situation but also of the nature of the macrosystem which provides parameters for the situation (1976:257)." Anthropological theory should pay special attention, he argued, to "how local level changes can produce national level consequences (ibid:263)."

Dick's perspective on development in northern Canada was intimately related to his experience in third world contexts. In the decolonizing world, he observed (1979a), independence had resulted in some positive benefits: better terms negotiated between new national governments and foreign business; boosts to local economies and human skills as nation-state bureaucracies and infrastructures were developed; and increased GNP's. But there were also some negative features of social change that afflict the third world that Dick believed we might avoid in northern Canada: the creation of white collar elites in the midst of populations of underemployed poor; the accelerated flow of people to better-served centres; and the weakening of the existing food-producing economy.¹

The key to realizing the benefits while avoiding the negative features would be the development of effective, decentralized, representative government(s) in the North, having the power to provide real solutions to northern problems — which meant control over natural resource use that provinces have (ibid). Development in the Canadian north would necessarily involve some large, localized industrial projects that were non-labour intensive. These could not directly provide a basis for the economic development of indigenous communities. But investment funds and revenues generated by large projects could and should contribute to offsetting ecological effects, and providing services for the

dispersed food-production system in northern regions. Negotiations and cooperation between northern governments and industries, investors and technologists would enable the service economy to expand its base beyond that provided by the subsistence economy; while the decisions of a local government with wide local support would provide conditions of predictability for industry (ibid). Modern services, controlled by regional northern governments, were reasonable exchange for Canada's claim to exist from sea to sea (Salisbury 1986b:517), and for economic benefits from large-scale development projects that northern regional populations could not undertake independently.

Northern natives' desire for modern services and transfers, on terms that would permit them to adapt their economies over time and in their own way, was crucial in finding "solutions acceptable to all" to crises provoked by industrial development projects. Dick was critical of research that he felt ignored this middle ground:

The picture of a land-based native economy opposing an industrial economy that Berger paints is simplistic and would have been helped by a more quantitative treatment, including transfers and services (1977b:15).

A social science analysis, Dick held, would be less black-and-white (although he acknowledged that black-and-white could be effective at conveying a political message to the public, advocating particular policies, or developing a strong court case).

These general views were of course shaped by Dick's particular involvement in research and recommendations regarding hydroelectric development at James Bay in the early 1970's. The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) in 1975 represented, to Dick, a major experiment in decentralized regional development (1983c). Local people would need to be in charge of providing services to their communities, of maintaining the conditions for land-based production, and of creating a productive modern sector. Direct negotiation with native political organizations would precipitate the corporate entities and bureaucratic arrangements needed for the task, and develop the necessary skills. The required financial and advisory support would flow as compensation and as legal commitments undertaken by external business and government (1979b).

Dick's evaluation was that the JBNQA was in fact a success in many important respects. While he was disturbed that social and ecological impacts tended to get inadequate consideration before hydro development decisions were taken on purely technical or financial grounds, the JBNQA did show, he

felt, that the social costs and benefits of development can be balanced via negotiation (1980). "Limited good", "zero-sum" thinking was largely circumvented, and positive changes in Cree society brought about, thanks to the presence of corporate bodies or "structures" (initially, the provincial Indians of Quebec Association; later, the regional Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec) that served as vehicles for shaping a "common interest" out of the crisis of hydro-electric development. The existence of structures permitted action to be taken, court cases to be initiated, research to be conducted, communities to be consulted, and a consensus to be expressed to outsiders. In due course, a variety of corporate arrangements emerged that were seen to be both "legitimate" Cree entities, and effective in administering the rights and benefits secured in negotiations (1983e).

The development of these arrangements was the subject of Dick's last book, *A Homeland for the Cree* (1986a). Here he argued that changes to Cree society between 1971 and 1981 were an "emergent outgrowth from their preexisting society and culture (ibid:vii)", and that the development of a regional Cree society was a process in which Cree had acted as architects, and not merely in reaction to external forces. Factors both internal and external had made this possible: the good will of Quebec and Canadian governments to decentralize governmental powers to a region; the Cree consciousness of regional unity provoked by the crisis of hydroelectric development; the availability of local personnel to operate emergent structures; a regime of services and transfers that made possible the maintenance of a viable local subsistence economy, as well as growth in administration and services; and predictability of resources and programs enunciated in legal, implementable terms enshrined in the JBNQA.

Dick believed that anthropologists had helped to put local native people on a more equal footing with government bureaucracy and industry in negotiating development, but not by advocating the interests of one side only. As "societal ombudsmen" (Salisbury 1976) we had to promote both sides' comprehension of the other's perception of development, of the social and ecological effects of development, and of possible courses of action. Dick believed that we could not perform this function efficiently if we became committed to one side only:

I am convinced that when an anthropologist commits himself to one side only, he nullifies many of the benefits that his professional training could give to that side. He is not able to retain any confidence from the other side and so is unlikely to make an accurate analysis of that

side's point of view, while any analysis he makes of his own side's point of view is unlikely to carry weight with the other side (ibid:257).

To an important degree, Dick felt that Cree had come to share these research values, noting their express appreciation of complete and honest research — even if findings were sometimes initially unpalatable — as essential to sound decision-making (1986a).

The "professional ethic of scientific impartiality and openness (1976:260)" was questioned by those of Dick's colleagues who believed that the realpolitik of development situations often required strategic use of information, in line with the objectives of activist advocacy. But both the integrity of Dick's approach, and its pragmatic value, have remained extremely persuasive.

So far as I am aware, Dick did not waver in his optimism for reasonable and decent outcomes among parties who, despite conflicting goals or inaccurate stereotypes of each other, were generally well-meaning. It was the kind of world he wanted; and it was, therefore, life as he himself transacted it.

Notes

1 Salisbury et al (1972a) included some of the first systematic research demonstrating the continued crucial importance of the subsistence economy, while also showing that population growth, absent important growth in wage employment opportunities through development, would have led to economic crisis within the decade.

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