

## Bernard Arcand, Anthropologist as Engaged Outsider

Harvey A. Feit *McMaster University*

I encountered Bernard Arcand occasionally but our exchanges were often memorable, as well as puzzling, amusing and enriching for me. Unfortunately, I never found the opportunities to get to know Bernard well.

The earliest substantial encounter with Bernard that I recall was when he served as a member of my Ph.D. oral defence committee. My 1978 dissertation was exceptionally long despite the urgings of my supervisor who warned me of the reception that its length would provoke among colleagues. Nevertheless, it somehow came as a surprise to me during the oral defence questioning, as I looked out the window at Mont Royal and sought to stay calm; that the examiners around the table had not actually read the thesis, just the introduction and conclusion.

As I relaxed, Bernard created another surprise for me. He asked a couple of fascinating questions about comparisons of Cree to other hunter-gatherers that depended on material buried in the central chapters of the thesis about hunting and social life. I did not have clear answers, but because the questions were so felicitously phrased, and they were asked with a twinkle in his eyes, they invited a discussion rather than a mental block. After the defence was over, and most of the examining committee members had departed, Bernard stayed to continue to discuss, to share more of his insights and to invite me to think and share more than I had been able to say on the spot. His engagement exemplified and affirmed that this

was a scholarly event and not just an administrative exercise.

It puzzled me for a long time after why Bernard did read the dissertation through, as it was very different in substance and style from his obvious gifts in analysis and writing. I puzzled enough that I got him to confirm that he had read it through. Over time however I came to see how Bernard repeatedly engaged ideas and issues in settings which were far from his obvious interests and I came to appreciate the exploratory intellect he brought to the world and to his colleagues. This was clearly one of the foundations of the diversity of his work. It certainly made my academic rite-de-passage a memorable and rewarding experience.

In the following decade Bernard and I were in touch through his involvement in northern Québec, including his appointment to a regional environmental committee. I do not recall that we ever sat in the same meetings, but when we did meet, we sometimes talked about and compared the environmental policy-making in the James Bay Cree and Northern Quebec Inuit regions. And I met other people involved in these regions who talked about Bernard's involvement.

In these encounters, Bernard and I had a moderate but palpable discomfort with each other. I would discuss from the perspective of a particular form of engaged anthropology, Bernard would reply from what I saw as a less engaged position that I found hard to locate, and which left me with a distinct disquiet. I am not sure I ever understood his engagement fully, but I came to appreciate many aspects of it.

In his presentation to a 1984 conference held in Kuu-jjuaq on environment, development and Kativik (the regional government in the Inuit areas), Bernard noted that he was the only member of his conference panel who was not immediately involved in development projects, and therefore he would try to present "a short overview of the situation seen from the outside" (Arcand 1985:244). This outsider positioning was reflected in his official involvement in the environment committee, as Bernard occupied an appointment on the committee that required the support of both Inuit and Quebec appointed committee members. It was an appointment that rather few individuals could fill. So I appreciated his honesty about taking up positions of marginality and his explorations of the roles this made it possible for him to undertake.

From the encounters we had and the stories I heard, I built up a sense and an appreciation of the effects that I think his work had in these settings, although I did not know him well enough to know if this interpretation would have overlapped with his own. I think he could speak in

ways that allowed him to expose the historical and the contingent in what others often presented as realistic, narrowly framed, and inflexible approaches to the business of such committees and of policy decision making. Given the inequalities of the situation, my sense was that his standing back to offer wider views, contingent conditions, and even playfulness and humour, which Bernard used so effectively, had effects that were not neutral but political and that he could play a very important role at critical junctures in opening situations and people to new dialogues.

The talk he gave at the environment and development conference in 1984 seems to exemplify this. He focused on misunderstandings between Inuit and governments and developers, and particularly the different ways that they identify and respond to "impacts," comparing indigenous views of life as an interconnected whole with modern views that culture is knowable only because it has distinct domains that can be understood with specific techniques (Arcand 1985). He highlighted Hydro-Québec's focus on largely economic impacts, quantification, and its insistence that you cannot "compare apples and oranges." Bernard linked the history of the separating of domains of life and culture to the 19th century creation of industrial production and of industrial workers, whose lives and milieu were divided into domains whereby only the narrowly economic aspects of their lives were relevant to their lives as employees. As the rapporteur of the conference wrote, Bernard then concluded, "If one cannot compare oranges to apples in arithmetic, they can, without doubt, be compared when one is hungry or if one likes fruit salad" (Morissette 1985:52).

Bernard's work and engagement made alternatives visible to participants in unexpected ways. It also gave me insights into a different form of engagement than my own, one that I could draw on to help my own work and my sanity in the midst of relentless and very specific assertions about which visions and practices were realistic and effective.

One of my last memories of encounters with Bernard was his visit to McMaster University a number of years ago to offer a departmental seminar and then to talk informally to a senior undergraduate class I taught that year on applying anthropology. His talk clearly influenced the ideas and probably the lives of a good number of that group of final year undergraduates struggling to imagine their futures. Bernard talked to them about his field research and writing, his book on pornography, his work as a consultant, and his media experience. They were fascinated, flocked to beers with him at the local pub after

the class, and talked about his visit throughout the remaining classes of the term. The course was different after his visit; the mood shifted perceptibly from angst to what I took to be a more confident commitment to explore possibilities.

Reflecting on his impact I think that for many members of the class he was a scholar whose work and life embodied what had drawn them to anthropology in the first place. His was a vision of anthropology and of its promise that, for many, their four years in the majors program seemed never to fulfill. I think they left the university more confident that they could find a way to do what they wanted, more appreciative of the value of what anthropology could make possible. It was clear to me that they thought that what Bernard had taught them in that seminar class was important as they figured out what specifically they wanted to do and how they wanted to engage with the world. I think they rediscovered that original vision of an anthropology that was engaged in issues that were vital to others in society, which was grounded in everyday life "at home" as well as in far away places, that was implicated in philosophical debates, and that could have effects because anthropologists could effectively communicate what they learned to wider publics. Bernard showed them how some of those visions could be fulfilled.

## References

- Arcand, Bernard  
1985 Development and Impacts: What Are We Talking About? *In* Environnement Kativik Environment. Peter Jacobs and Hervé Chatagnier, eds. Pp. 243-246. Montréal: Kativik Regional Government.
- Morissette, Diane  
1985 Pour mieux entendre les silences. *In* Environnement Kativik Environment. Peter Jacobs and Hervé Chatagnier, eds. Pp. 41-47. Montréal: Kativik Regional Government.
-