

For a responsible "aboriginalism"

Interview with geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin

René Boudreault*,
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Louis-Edmond Hamelin is a geographer and pioneer in polar research in Canada. Founder of the Center for Polar Studies at Laval University, he is an ex-member of the Yellowknife Legislative Assembly. He was also rector of the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. He published many articles and some of his neologisms have become part of the vocabulary.

CONFLUENCES MAGAZINE.- With an intellectual's approach who takes a general interest in spaces which bear the trace of man, i.e. as a geographer, you have devoted your career to the study of the polar environment. How did you become interested in the "aboriginalology" or to everything that has something to do with prehistoric and contemporary aboriginals?

LOUIS-EDMOND HAMELIN.- I didn't have any choice because ever since I first set foot in James Bay's nordic environment in the late '40s I was dumbfounded and fascinated with the aboriginal reality. My "northology" thus became "aboriginalian" and my fervor as a young natural science student was fundamentally affected by the contact with the environment and by the mandatory interrelations of the many referents to take into consideration, if we want to understand the North. I didn't expect that intellectual shock, I thought that the North was the North of the South, but in fact it was the center of an aboriginal country inhabited in its own way. From then on, this perception never left me, even if I went to Europe for a few years with some experts to take an interest to natural things seen as objects, to the "quantitative northicity". At the time, I had somewhat forgotten the North as a global subject. But that was not fulfilling enough and I was not at ease. That approach was keeping me away from my subject of interest namely, the livability of the environment. I then unhesitatingly got interested in "qualitative northicity", in human sciences, linguistics, and geography in its fullest expression.

C. M.- Contrary to most researchers, you are not only interested in things but also

in beings. What really piqued your interest in the human being?

L.-E. H.- All of my experimental research and my relations with the inhabitants of the North led me to this qualitative approach which allows to grasp the "northicity" and to develop a genuine "northology" known as the outcome of the contribution from many specialties and the integrated comprehension of immense northern complexes or from the norths. Too many meetings, events, faces, voices and analyses remain indelibly engraved in my mind and translated into my logic for me to forget the cultural importance of the Nations of the North and the aboriginal nations in general. The intelligence of the North without its "aboriginality" is impossible. The ethnicity constitutes a fundamental referent in the phrase "qualitative northicity".

The burden of proof belongs to non-aboriginals, because they have centuries of catching-up to do.

I will always remember the amazement of the Cri guide with whom I shared my first great nordic emotions oaring down a James Bay river's stormy cascades during my early years as a researcher. I still feel the reconciliation which the common danger had transformed in each of us and the almost ecstatic pleasure reminiscence this stressful feat while having tea on a camp fire at the foot of the rapids. This was my christening to "aboriginalism", not that I was naively biased towards certain aboriginal ideologies, but rather as an understanding of an inhabited area by people and by a culture whose competence I didn't have that I greatly admired. The comprehension of the Nordic environment's ethnicity is essential to the development of "mental northicity" i.e. the state of a North that fills the psyche and that permeates the attitudes. I then got interested in global geography starting with human development with the objective of enhancing the environment's versatility. We had to know how to live better in the North, to identify the aboriginals' and non-aborig-

inal's threshold of well-being. On that course which I have passionately embarked on for many wonderful years and which I consider as the most productive period of my life and career, I formed many nice friendships and reciprocities with some aboriginals. The pinnacle of this relationship and the perception of my personal and professional usefulness undoubtedly happened when I became a member of the Northwest Territories' Legislative Assembly.

Promoting intercultural development

C. M.- Since the first encounters almost five hundred years ago, what were the relationships between the aboriginals and the governments, which future course do you personally favor?

L.-E. H.- Many courses have been explored since the "founders'" arrival to this day. The aboriginals' exclusion of all decision-making pertinent to government, land and its resources is the first one. That exclusion has often been translated by the First Nations' ignorance or indifference during the land developments; this attitude led to the appropriation by non-aboriginals of all the legal and geographical space that was available. Another course was the one of the rationalized domination on the basis of the non-aboriginals' ethnic superiority, thus leading to the aboriginals' assimilation. Then, a third kind of exclusion was the one the aboriginals call the "the parallel two-row wampum" (*Editor's note: the wampum is a pearl belt traditionally used to symbolize a new alliance or a treaty*). Thus, the parallel two rows are described to illustrate how each of them, aboriginals and non-aboriginals, separately conduct their affairs. More recently, the aboriginals have experienced the self-promotion in order to valorize their rights and interests, they proclaimed their inherent rights to self-determination, required the renegotiation of treaties, advocated self-sufficiency; it provoked strong opposition and involves important risks of rejection. Another approach is the distributive justice one and the alleviation of the industrial developments' negative impacts on culture and aboriginal lands. This generous approach is a sympathetic one, but it is insufficient since it does not rely on



Louis-Edmond Hamelin with colleagues at a typical Algonquin meal of Pikogan

the relation's fairness. The option that we must keep is the one that favors intercultural relations from a solidarity, fraternity and respect for cultural pluralism point of view. It is the course of joint decision making, that of humanism. It requires the adoption of a philosophy, a use in which the key words would not only be reconciliation but convergence, gathering, association and joint planning.

C. M.- What are the main intercultural parameters?

L.-E. H.- The concept of "interculturalism" favors the analysis of deficient secular links between aboriginals and non-aboriginals and offers a hypothesis in order to improve the situation. It supposes the acceptance of cultural difference, the dismantling of the non-aboriginals' biased mental framework and the aboriginals' promise to participate in the social development. This supposes the strict cohabitation because it is the product of an integrated system characterized by exchanges in different forms such as fairness, stability and good neighborly terms.

The political realization of an intercultural objective within a state constitutes what I call "aboriginalism". It is defined as a cultural political system of a nation-state and of its citizens taking into consideration the transmission of collective realities from Canada's First Nations. Without a real "aboriginalism" on either side, we will be going nowhere and we will repeat the same mistakes that history bestowed upon us. *The burden of proof belongs to the non-aboriginals' since they have centuries of ignorance to catch up to.*

Better information

C. M.- In a process that you believe essential to any relation that would

prove to be efficient and worthy, you hope for an awareness campaign to inform the public of the aboriginal realities. What are the conditions of an efficient education campaign?

L.-E. H.- Centuries of superiority and rejection have relinquished the subject as knowledge. One notices again a wrongful information, false knowledge tinted by folk rumors. The reality is distorted by the mirrors of sufficiency, the stereotypes abound. In order to install a minimum of acres of "aboriginality" in the absent-minded non-aboriginals, the intercultural education cannot be improvised, it must reach all levels of society such as the education system, decision-makers, the media, the public at large and the politicians. This large-scale action is the only way to catch up half a millennium of indifference. Among the possible avenues, let's mention manpower training for teaching and communications, the elaboration of appropriate models for "interculturality" and the assurance that better information will improve the absent-minded "aboriginalism" practiced by non-aboriginals.

C. M.- How do you envision a constitutional outcome that would be worthwhile to the aboriginal nations of Canada and to the aboriginal nations of Québec?

L.-E. H.- The effort that must be consented to identify a common constitutional agreement worthwhile for the aboriginal nations is the same for Québec than for Canada. These two political and legal arenas are affected by the same original sin stemming from a mentality of colonization and the discovery of the "terra nullius". The problem posed by the *Constitutional Act of 1982* consists in the fact that the aboriginal concept is not defined and that the rights and powers of the aboriginal nations also are not specified. This gives rise to interpretation conflicts from either side and to never-ending legal recourses that lead us nowhere. Any proposal of a new struc-

ture must stem from an ideology and not from political pressures. Those structures must then be translated and implemented by an associative system.

Knowing or loving the North?

C. M.- Finally, what message do you want to leave researchers, specialists, generalists and humanists who are interested in these issues?

L.-E. H.- I recommend them to use their energy to think rather than to know. Although knowledge is preferable, real reflection involves action. There are two ways of being a "Northist". The first one leads to the "Northicity" of knowledge, of the intellect, of reason, of logic, of argumentation, it only leads to the satisfaction and to the pleasures of knowledge whereas the other way leads to the "Northicity" of behavior, of emotions, of dialogue, of humanity; it goes beyond the ecological, economic and technical successes. It is a success of "interculturality" and of livability. These results are incarnate.

Should we know the North or should we rather love it? Should we develop the resources of the North or should we develop the North and integrally inhabit it? Are we looking for a southern comfort while there or are we seeking a symbiosis between man and his physical habitat?

It is intuition more often than reason which sparked most scientific discoveries. Must we never forget that a country is not founded on knowledge only but also (and especially) with emotions. After having known and admired our mutual skills, we all need to meditate at the foot of a rapid while sipping tea with the Other. ■

*Consultant in aboriginal affairs