

On the Relationship Between Scholarship and Democracy

Over the 50 years of *Arctic's* publication, a series of dedicated editors and countless reviewers have applied their skills in the quest for clarity of thought, expression and concept in the best interests of an interdisciplinary readership. This tradition has fostered scholarly citizenship, in line with John Ralston Saul's contemporary appeal for academics (1995) to avoid the language of corporatist elites, which is typically private, exclusionary and supportive of hierarchies of knowledge. For Saul, a philosopher whose language is unintelligible to an archaeologist is as corporatist in manner and form as the mining company president who relies on euphemism and double-speak to explain the lack of gold showings in a core sample. One must ask: Just who is served when shareholders cannot understand explanations of basic geology, or when one academic discipline cannot comprehend the research of another? Why do universities persist in encouraging departmental and faculty hierarchies that promote corporatism rather than citizenship, which contribute to obfuscation rather than clarity?

The evidence is now before us that many contemporary scientific problems, such as global warming, the accumulation of toxins in polar biological systems, and seasonal ozone depletion are best approached using interdisciplinary modes of inquiry. Here at the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA), our membership in the federally sponsored Network of Centres of Excellence (NCE) on Sustainable Forest Management is daily reinforcing this observation. The work of the NCE requires foresters to talk with lawyers, sociologists to work with ecologists, and pulp mill managers to co-operate with First Nations communities in applying traditional land use studies to the creation of co-management regimes. If there is one lesson in all of this, it is the need for plain language and for lateral rather than vertical channels of communication. The NCE, in promoting Canadian collegial research networks, is really advocating responsible academic citizenship and challenging the old paradigm of elitist scholarship.

The more I think of the NCE in this respect, the more my mind goes back to the wisdom of the founders of *Arctic* and the AINA. What a radical idea it must have been 52 years ago to create an institute based on the idea of promoting the practice of northern research and sharing the peer-reviewed results with as broad an audience as possible. Our founders well understood the utility of networks (before "network" became a buzzword) and of horizontal rather than hierarchical collaboration. Dissatisfied with elites, they created an open-membership society, whose highest distinction, election to the Fellowship, is awarded by AINA's board to scholars, administrators, and writers whose careers have exemplified a significant contribution to the knowledge of polar and subpolar regions. By encouraging geographic rather than disciplinary areas of practice, AINA's founders struck an early blow for scholarly citizenship.

In the insightful work of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam (1993), which analyzes contemporary and historical Italian regional governance systems, we find intriguing new evidence for the importance of geographic research frames of reference, lateral channels of association, and open collegial communication. Putnam has discovered that the best predictor of good government is a healthy civil society, one that fosters a dense network of civic associations organized collaboratively amongst equals. In this way, choral societies, soccer clubs, and co-operatives indicate a vital regional democracy. Should we be surprised that horizontal networks of civil society enthusiasts, rather than vertical patron-client relationships of exploitation and dependence, are key to establishing peace, order, and good government? Putnam's lesson for AINA is that a community of collaborative northern scholars, organized around interdisciplinary research problems focused on a geographic area, has a lot in common with Italian soccer players, choristers, and co-op members. We are all playing the same game, singing the same song, and reinvesting the same patronage dividends in a process called democracy.

REFERENCES

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