

Culture

Reply to Michael Ames

Bruce G. Trigger



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Reply to Michael Ames

Bruce G. Trigger

Professor Ames's rejoinder elucidates in a very helpful way how ethnology curators perceive their relations to Native People and academic anthropologists. My own contacts with museums have made me aware of the ambiguities in the relations between curators and academic anthropologists. At the same time Ames does not appear to take account of the basic thrust of my argument, which he summarily dismisses as adopting "a moral attitude towards the question of who owns the past" and not concluding "with practical recommendations for change." He then suggests for good measure that having Native People assume a majority position in the field of anthropology and in established federal, provincial, and municipal museums would be "little more than another form of colonial appropriation." While I hope that my judgements of the past are "moral," my recommendations are based on the firm conviction that what is fundamental to human dignity in a class society is power and the control of resources. Symbols, while important in "naturalizing," perpetuating, and overcoming injustices, are not at the root of human struggles. Although anthropologists and curators are not in a position to rectify the vast array of injustices under which Native People continue to suffer in Canada, they are at least in a position to try to put their own houses in order.

Ames contends that Native People will not want much to do with anthropology and museums. Yet, as I suggested in my talk, that remains highly speculative until Native People have a real chance to choose. It also does not explain why, despite limited resources, Native People are establishing and managing their own museums across Canada. Nor would the entry of substantial numbers of Native People into these fields necessarily be "little more than a form of colonial appropriation" since, as I also suggested, they would then for the first time have the chance to transform these fields and institutions according to their own priorities.

I do not wish to become involved in a prolonged debate about whether anthropologists or museum curators are more estranged from Native People. I did not suggest that anthropologists moved away from the study of museum collections beginning in the 1930s "because of any growing sympathy for Native Peoples." To a large degree they probably did so initially because they saw an attractive expanded role for themselves as advisors to governments about Native policy; although this does not mean that they did not also paternalistically believe that they had a chance to "help" Native People. The main, although unintended, consequence of this development, however, has been a growing understanding among an-

thropologists of the nature of EuroCanadian and EuroAmerican society, derived from the perspective of how it treats Native People. Perhaps not so ironically, the principal accomplishment to date of the discipline most devoted to the study of the "exotic" and the "other" has been to reveal to its practitioners unpleasant things that they had not previously understood about the nature of their own society.

Ames offers as an alternative to my proposal the vision of autonomous, self-governing (still White?) collegia of anthropologists and curators working "towards more liberated forms of anthropology and curatorship, ones which will liberate indigenous people from the hegemony of academic and curatorial interpretations." Yet even a critical anthropology or museology of this sort would remain a self-defeating continuation of the paternalism and internal colonialism that has always characterized these fields. Its criticism would be incomplete, being directed only against its subject matter rather than against its own values and organization. In addition to rationalizing conservative professional attitudes, this position does not satisfactorily resolve the issue of what the relation should be between Native People and the surviving material heritage which has been alienated from them by anthropologists and museums. I would assert today, even more categorically than I did in Saskatoon, that decolonization requires the return of the management of that heritage to Native People, whatever the consequences. No matter what is their ontological status, it is wrong to underestimate the importance of old ceremonial objects in giving a sense of legitimacy to contemporary political processes. As Tony Hall has eloquently pointed out in a recent letter to me: "If Aboriginal organizations cannot even exercise a degree of jurisdiction over the material culture that

remains to reflect the course of their own history...what kind of real possibilities do they have to exercise their own self-government? Seen in this way, old items created by Aboriginal artists and artisans could have great significance in helping to add a sense of legitimacy and continuity with the past, in the decision-making processes of contemporary organizations." The repatriation of Native culture is a demand that may win widespread public and ultimately government support, long before there is such support for significant enhancement of the political and economic rights of Native People. Under these circumstances, it is not merely "another form of colonial appropriation" to encourage the curatorship of existing collections by Native People.

Ames says that I am incorrect on several points relating to the Spirit Sings exhibition. His statistics do not contradict my statements. I have also read the copy of a letter from a European curator (not a "Lubicon supporter in Calgary") urging that Native People be invited to contribute a section dealing with current issues to the exhibition. As the Spirit Sings has travelled east it has been the focus of a lavish publicity campaign, which has as its implicit subtext that the past "is the possession of those in power," in this case the Canadian Museum of Civilization and Shell Oil. Without being asked, Government and big business have become the Indians' patrons. Anthropologists and curators can no longer plead naivety for their participation in such public events. They may plead financial dependency, but can the recipients of such largesse then also claim that they do not dance to the giver's fiddle? Increasingly, and justly, anthropologists and curators must answer to Native People for their actions, until that happy time when "we" and "they" cease to be spiritually and socially alienated from one another.