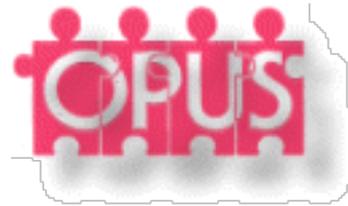


AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Canada and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In part 1 of the Listening Post the members were invited to share their experiences and preoccupations in a variety of social roles that they occupy in their everyday life. This part was also of usefulness in 'breaking the ice' between the members of the whole group, as the event was an unknown experience for all members involved. A dynamic atmosphere soon developed and most members shared several of their everyday social thoughts and concerns.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1.

In this part of the discussion, participants identified and explored societal pre-occupations, anxieties, and experiences. An ESL teacher began by reflecting on the experience new immigrants to Canada and her wish to alleviate their difficulties. Another spoke of Canada's 'place' in the world and the limited opportunities for citizens even those with considerable talents. One member said, "our federal government *squats* on everything: the arts, sciences, women. A top down party of one, it stifles all talent". Another spoke of the aging Canadian populace, and her worries about the pervasiveness of Alzheimer's disease. This was followed by a sense that Toronto's ignominious Mayor of the past years and his hapless leadership, has meant that Toronto has become 'meaner'. Decisions that were made on behalf of (or irrespective of) public interest cannot now be undone, leading to a sense of 'getting meaner oneself'. This was echoed by a member who could not attend but said he felt a marked sense of 'lessening of empathy'. Another participant told of a fragment from a film about an owner of a kidnapped dog complaining to the kidnapper about the unfairness of 'being interrupted' in his life by this event - to which the kidnaper replied - "this is life now". Participants reiterated an unending sense of disruption and interruption in their lives and spoke about a deep sense of incomprehensibility in the world around them - planes go missing, air accidents occur, terrorisms discourses dominate. No one who should be is accountable. Several participants spoke of the difficulty in 'thinking', of trying to fashion a self-connected to others, the slippage or split between one's on-line

self and one's 'real self', 'forgetting where one is'. This provoked discussion about the media: one member spoke about his 'trial by media' and 'media vigilantism', eroding or annihilating any sense of privacy of self; an erosion that was linked to the question of 'what is consent' and troubling questions of bodily integrating and a painful lack of consensus as to what constitutes sexual 'consent' – the case of this member, a Canadian media personality and Bill Cosby being cited. Participants discussed events in Paris qua punctuated and violent 'events' as opposed to the more every-day violence and a fascination with zombies and the living dead. Concerned was expressed about the unhelpful tendency to oversimplify in order to withstand complexity. Only one participant could look back on 2014 with a sense of gratitude for 'things that came true'.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES:

In Part 2, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

Theme 1: A dwindling sense of agency and a loss of connection with self and others:

This theme contained a recognition that while social media produces and proliferates a 'sense' of continuous on-line relating there is a deep sense of being less and less connected to others and less and less able to effect others. Its capacity for surveillance erodes any sense of privacy hence this surreal 'connectedness' leaves us feeling vulnerable and over-exposed, over-stimulated and perpetually 'interrupted', evoking a fantasy realm where so-called public life is indistinguishable from private life. The body is more and more subjected to policing, reified and simultaneously denigrated, more and more prettified and commodified. The sensorial is 'distributed' in terms of touch and vision, inducing a sense of bodily fragmentation.

The overall self-experience was one of being simultaneously isolated yet open to, and vulnerable in the face off, violation from others. This self-representation, ushered in a fear that the group as a whole would suffer such annihilatory anxiety, panic and helplessness, that it's thinking would be clogged, or give way to a thinking-stance of black/white, and/or, a with-us/against-us attitude.

Theme 2: Absence of the 'accountable' and guaranteeing other:

Participants lamented the dire incompetency and irresponsibility of those in government particularly at the national and provincial levels, who were to be elected to represent and 'care for' the needs of citizens. And further, a noticeable loss of patience for the required

struggles to hold those in authority to account. Given no systematic way to hold them to account, a deep sense of helplessness pervades. And given the possibility that there is no guaranteeing other, how are we to deal with the rising terror and rage? "Our mouths are wide open" but no words are emitted.

The group-as-a-hole, experienced the other, initially, as being mean-spirited, uncaring, and at times as harmful bullies. Ultimately, the other was feared to have the ability to become transformed into, supernatural undead zombies, vampires, and ghouls, who would then carry out arbitrary intensely bizarre acts of torture and torment which would result in the group's degradation, disintegration, and decimation.

Theme 3: Violating media and violence 'everywhere':

The aggressive 'trial by media' makes it impossible for citizens to understand or experience 'justice'. Constant images and representations of violence around us and within produces a deep sense of precariousness and inability to withstand and make sense. Since it is difficult to 'know' our experience, to process and metabolize it, we are like immigrants to these 'new' and painful realities. Though Canada can be understood as providing a 'good life' – it is not at all good for many.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1: The failure of the idea of autonomous subjectivity

Analysis: The analysis was characterized by recognition that each of the themes interpenetrate each other, linking questions of how to characterize the experience of the self in relation to the society of which we are part, with the ideas and words necessary to do in the presence of the other. How are we to make sense of this 'new' place we find ourselves in?

Hypothesis: Faced with pervasive dislocations between the on-line self, the real self, the persecuted self offered by media and social media, members of society experience the impossibility of imaging a 'continuous self'. This results in enormous difficulties in originating and navigating a sense of 'who one really is' against and amidst the proliferation of images and representations of who one could be or should be.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2. Mourn the loss of the guaranteeing other
Analysis: We feel ourselves furious at those who ought to ensure care and accountable action and helpless to influence their conduct. We experience an authority and mode of governance which is authoritarian, unresponsive, and decidedly unaccountable in a democratized state in which democracy itself is in question.
Hypothesis: Faced with the painful realities of no guaranteeing other – that is the other who assures us of our reality and authorizes our experience of reality, members of society experience significant primitive anxiety. Feeling exposed and betrayed, what ever 'faux sense of security' that once existed has now evaporated. And further, the lack of this signifying other stirs primitive feelings of rage which inhibits the capacity to think and erodes the ability to distinguish feelings from thoughts.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3. Sense of constant danger
Analysis: Everywhere we look, we are presented with violence and images of violence. The experience is one of demoralization and terror, with no action that can reduce this. Our own psychical survival seems at stake hence we feel both vengeance and seek revenge from the unknown and unknowable attacks.

Hypothesis: Faced with an erosion of, or loss of the fantasy of safety and security, primitive feelings of annihilation emerge. The result is that subjects must confront the desire for a thing that does not exist and continue to desire it none the less.

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