AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Canada and the World at the Dawn of 2013
Report 1 of a Listening Post held in Toronto on 9th January
(Report 2 follows)

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post we were invited to identify, contribute, and explore our experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context.

The discussion was lively and, the main focus was on how difficult it has been to change things in the face of highly consolidated economic and political power, the entrenchment of social and professional interests, and the increasingly fragmented ideologies. The re-election of Obama seemed to many a case of a weak and relatively impotent president triumphing over an excessively radical opponent. There was not much hope that Obama would be able to achieve very much of an agenda that could result in reducing inequalities, improving the environment, or even reducing gun violence in the United States — despite the Newtown shootings. Others felt that there have been some stirrings of change. There appear to be some seedlings of citizen based reaction to such major forces as the large and self-serving corporations, and powerful professional lobbies.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represents a clustering of at least some of these themes.

1. Technological Innovation and the Impact on Radical Change
There was a strong feeling that we are beginning to see the deeper effects of the computer age. The loss of privacy for individuals because of the growth of Big Data analysis was given as an example as was the capacity for crowd-sourcing because of the emergence of powerful social networking. These two changes have to major reconfiguration of political organization not only in western democracies but through the Middle East, North Africa and much of Asia. There are new tools that are being used by all sides, but the core sentiment was that because so many people could self-organize with little preparation this would largely become a force for democratization. Obama's victory in the United States was pointed out as an example of this, as were the continued vitality of the popular movements associated with the Arab Spring. Someone pointed out that even in the UK the virtually spontaneous demonstrations against Starbucks non-payment of taxes was an example of this new force.

2. The Aging of the Population in Canada
and in other Advacnced Democracies
Canadian health care system like others, is suffering from increasing costs without any real improvement of population health. The greater costs of providing health care to an aging population in a hospital centred system backed by very powerful doctors an effective pharmaceutical lobby professional forces has been extraordinarily costly and not particularly effective. Some of us believed that the bringing older people to hospitals generally made them sicker and resulted in a kind of revolving door of ever escalating costs and increasing illness. They believe that our health care system is no longer fit for purpose. It does not have the capacity to treat people with chronic conditions in the communities they live in and the escalating costs are a result of excessive resources put into hospital care, rather than in preventive treatment and community support for both patient and their family caregivers. In Canada more than half the population dies of cancer or heart disease, both now clearly understood as chronic conditions.

Almost everyone else over 65 also dies as a result of chronic illness, whether due to diseases of the lung, or liver or of diabetes. Because all the energy has been directed at making the existing system more efficient, rather than in recognizing that it is no longer appropriate in its present form, some of us argued that the only way to change it was by organizing the patients and caregivers themselves to begin to take control over their own care. Others believed that the system would simply self destruct when costs became unbearable.

3. The Consequences of a Majority Government in Canada

Government now has a majority in parliament. As a result they are able to put into practice much of their political agenda without an adequate chance for public debate. They have created omnibus bills which include such things as increased mandatory sentencing for crimes, much higher expenditures on the military, and lower ones on social programs, and so on without its being evident to the general public. The result has been a dramatic move to the right in policy terms, but with almost no widespread public awareness. They have used their majority with an understanding of the weaknesses of parliamentary democracy. So we seem to be living in a majority dictatorship. There was a renewed discussion about the need for increased citizen participation and how this might come to be.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3 of the Listening Post we were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics that may be predominant. It is assumed in this part of our discussion that our individual and collective ideas and ways of thinking determine how we perceive the world. We tried to develop hypotheses as to why these concerns might be occurring now and although there were few clear, easily identifiable hypotheses, there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This discussion has been distilled into the following two hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: There were not many explanations about the concerns expressed in the room. The talk was as usual lively and somewhat disorderly. The discussions resulted in several hypotheses.

Hypothesis: The fear that our systems are not working — either democratically or in health terms suggests a current weariness coupled with a hope that change is on its way. Somehow an external force will save us. For example, it seems as if there is a hope that technology, trhough social media, which remain little understood is fast becoming a mysterious force that can save us. Words like "Crowdsourcing" "going viral" suggested new and unusual ways of mobilizing forces for the good. A kind of magical thinking pervaded the room at times suggesting that we are too tired to see possible solutions for ourselves.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The issue of an aging population reflected the age of the participants in the room a group now mainly made up of retirees. Though extreme aging and death are not imminent for our members, these issues surround us and are becoming increasingly in mind. A health care system that serves us better is very much needed in Canada.

Hypothesis: There is no technical fix for death. The inevitability of aging and death fixes the focus of older people. Increasingly there is the realization that the high tech medicine we have invested in for many decades is not the solution to how medical care is best delivered to an inexorably aging population. The very success of anti-aging methods in North America where the new 70 is 50 suggests that hope has been that the new results would fend off the inevitable deterioration and death for very long times. The result has been a system that ignores 'normal' and has for a time treated aging itself as a disease.

Convener: Sholom Glouberman

Canada in the World at the End of 2012
Report 2 of a Listening Post held in Toronto in January 2013

This report is based on the discussion of a group of academics, analysts, therapists and students of psychoanalysis

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the discussion, participants identified and explored societal pre-occupations, anxieties, and experiences. Our themes moved across: the use and abuse of political power, the Israeli elections and its meaning for ethical communities, the Idle No More movement and what 'resistance' offers in a time of war. We explored numerous themes related to the internet — as a proxy for instinctual life, as space junk, as a giant 'id', as a situation that strips away affect, as a space of instant 'empty' gratification, and as a transitional space, to name a few. We were curious what happens to thinking and knowledge, what happens to arguments and conversations, what people may believe, and then, the nature of expressions that compose 'virtual reality.' This lead to a discussion on the relationship among eugenics as science, the proliferation of neuroscience, neuropedagogy, neuropolitics and the desire to purify by 'knowing' absolutely this new frontier of the mind. We wondered what it means to have a 21st century 'mind' when the world changes so rapidly, and when our consciousness to comprehend our mind is thought to be 'too slow'.

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:

1. Extinction of civilization and ethicality
This theme contained various strands of concern These discussions provoked us to wonder about the prevalence of a collective death drive and its possible links to our uses of technology. It was felt that there is a sense of impossibility around the world. What might this despair suggest for our own unconscious experience of helplessness, primitive anxieties, and efforts to defend against them. How may our capacity to think together both as a container and as a containing fractal help us clarify the relation between feelings and perceptions?

2. The abject space and possibilities for the self
One member spoke about the Amazon commercial site and the discussions in the form of book reviews affect our reading choices. Users can post huge numbers of anonymous negative book reviews in an activity called 'swarming', on the belief that this protest can impact the appeal of the book and end its life. One member spoke about Skype consulting and fears of being watched. In this vast, uncertain and altogether unknowable space, anyone can say anything at any time about anything; Yet the nature of discourse is split into 'like' and 'don't like,' now as a pretence for thinking. The electronic space seems to provoke a compulsion to 'speak', to share intimate details devoid of intimacy. And simultaneously, we can 'speak' into that space without authorizing our own statements or authorizing them as if we were an/other. We wondered if this 'speaking' might actually allow for the possibility of privacy while seeming to suggest its opposite. Our posts, however, take on a timeless quality — photographs, digital bits of information are available to anyone and everyone and they languish forever and without censorship. We felt the internet never forgets and never forgives. If one applies for a job, one can be 'found' and 'discovered' on face book. The rise of bullying and cyber stalking in the virtual space — empty and full — suggest that this space can cannibalize and destroy. One member commented on how much time is lost, unrecognized or perhaps unacknowledged on the web. It is as if time is swallowed and negated, as though we say to ourselves 'I know it is the case that I spend a lot of time in the internet, but I refuse to believe it'. The internet then becomes on the one hand a dense space, for evacuation of affect. This reminded us of Bion's minus K in its active destruction of knowledge, and thoughts without a thinker. By viewing virtual space as 'abject' we are able to ask who or what therefore is the 'subject' and how are we to apprehend unconscious processes? Affected as we are by this

dense space, our fears and fantasies about it, without and with traces of its effects, how does it replicate and represent the dense space of the divided inner life of the self and other?

3. Thinking and engaging

Related to the theme of the internet as a dense space, the discussion took us to what we believe the internet allows, provokes, and limits for the capacity to think, to reflect, to effect one another. In expressing 'themselves' electronically, 'they' act, enact, act out in a limitless barrage postings. Who are these 'they' that we are watching? Who is watching 'us'? And how do our interactions with them and they with each other, effect our capacity to think, to argue, to have sustained conversation with one another? Several academics commented on their students' use of the internet during lectures, cutting and pasting for essays, purchasing books on line — immersed in the virtual space in conjunction with the 'so-called' real space. Another spoke of the strong resistances to using technology for psychoanalysis. Participants wondered how new technology might enhance the practice of psychoanalysis and speculated on how difficult it is for institutions and institutionalized thinking to unveil and re/think it premises. Another member, referred to vast sums of research dollars allocated to brain research. Neuroscience acts like the new space program with the brain as the new frontier. If the brain can be mapped, and thinking can be understood simply though neural mapping, what then constitutes learning and development? If the internet is a repository for beta elements and repetitively animates -K, the how are we to think together. And interestingly, this very conversation acted as its possibility and its difficulty.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Insistent ethicality and thinking

Analysis: The analysis was characterized by recognition that each of the themes interpenetrate each other, linking questions of how to characterize consciousness now, how to characterize the 21st century mind and what would be sustaining in the midst of such painful experiences. The profound thoughtlessness, archaic destructive forces are suggestive of horrible envy in the fight over rights and freedoms. We asked 'what would make for good enough links'; what kind of 'cut' would have to be made? How are we to animate an ethical community?

Hypothesis: Faced with an awareness of war, threats of war, intractable threats to possibilities for ethical relationality, and at the same time capable of containing and metabolizing (to some degree) the excesses of the death drive, members of society face the trauma or fear of affect and the struggle to refuse splitting off of painful feelings. The result is a profound effort to transform inchoate beta elements (terror, despair, rage) into alpha elements through symbolization and ethicality of thinking together. The prevailing collective emotion suggested the capacity to sustain a depressive position for thinking which, however difficult, demonstrated the opposite of our preoccupation and undertook important 'work' as a fractal.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Subject formation with/in and with/out the virtual space

Hypothesis: Because of the ever-present real and imagined virtual space, and 'those' who live in and persistently animate the space, and 'those' who do less so, but are non-the-less effected by it, members of society worry about the deployment of self as evacuation without responsibility, as attachment without intimacy, as affect without thought. This results in members of society having

profound concerns about the forming of 'a self', a self that appears to transit an array of performative spaces addictively without being its own origin. Has the self-disappeared into an unconscious fantasy, thought to be real but not. At the same time, how may we foster the requirement for members of society to continue to undertake the work of originating 'a self' and working through individual and collective paranoia to reach into negative capability?

Convener: Barbara Williams