

Refusing the Marketplace

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2004

Prologue

“Lady
with the very modern illness
agoraphobia
but ancient as fear
in a Greek marketplace

Lady
I have seen your face
crumple and break in ecstasy
of terror of horror of being
alive in the sewer world
feeling alien thoughts beating
at your mind an office desk
protruding from one ear
a subway train from the other
bells clanging gongs shouting
while you’re washing the dishes
terror
of the market place
and falling
falling into that white place
without shadows
where the rivers are milk
and Lethe dreams
and nothingness has no horizon...”

— excerpt from Al Purdy's "The Stone Bird" in *To Paris Never Again* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1997).

The Oxford dictionary terms "agoraphobia" as "a morbid dislike of public places." This definition stems from the Greek word "agora" which is "an assembly, hence the place of assembly, especially the marketplace." In the one world of global capitalism, where the marketplace has increasingly swallowed what used to be public space and the commons has been devoured by the mall, agoraphobia needs to be redefined.

Is it "morbid" to feel anxiety in a situation where public places are fast becoming privatized? While not wanting to romanticize the agony associated with those suffering from agoraphobia, by flipping the script we can see that it is the relationship between the marketplace and the public sphere which is morbid rather than the adverse reaction of the individual who is repelled by it. Any personal trauma associated with such an insidious relationship and the corresponding acceleration of street surveillance to protect this expansion of private property should not be simplistically dismissed as "mental illness." Rather what is labeled as "psychosomatic" malaise in this respect is not merely a case of mind over matter, but is rooted in our dis-ease at the increasing usurpation of the public domain by the marketplace.

These days, not to be deeply troubled by such a toxic confluence of the marketplace and public space is to be comatose. What is truly morbid is to numb the awareness of our fears in this regard with a passivity-inducing diet of anti-depressants, computer game tidbits, "reality" television morsels, and Clear Channel sound bites; all of which are conveniently provided for our consumption by the market itself. Together they serve to screen out or allay those fears of the marketplace considered to be abnormal and triumphantly proclaim the normality of a way of life predicated upon hierarchy, competition and the unequal distribution of power and wealth.

We are encouraged to voyeuristically watch a growing array of dog-eat-dog survival shows which contrast sharply with the boredom of our daily work ruts and leisure time passivities. We are made prey to makeover shows that exploit our body image insecurities and remind us that our physical imperfections can be masked or surgically eliminated for a price. As an ego boost, we can conveniently turn on Jerry Springer to allow us to feel superior to the oh so tacky losers who are his guests. And, along with the cheezy competitors on American Idol, we are enticed to vicariously dream of being stars with enough fame and fortune to purchase anything we want.

Though this manipulative media landscape and the capitalist marketplace of which it is a part are social constructions which can be dismantled, they are assumed to be permanent givens by the rulebook of consensus reality. Even if while consuming this programming, a mysterious fear should well up in us, we have been conditioned not to blame the market. The officially prescribed remedy is to turn on the tv and increase the dosage of consumption.

Increasingly then, we find that both our psychic well-being and our individual identities have become synonymous with market demographics. It is no accident that Dubya in a televised speech urged troubled Americans to go shopping when faced with the horrors of 9/11. Not only does hyper-consumption fuel the economy, but our fears of the market are marketed back to us in the form of frightening images of appallingly evil foreign terrorists who are said to be jealous of our high consumption lifestyle or anti-corporate globalization protesters who are seen as so disdainful of our affluent position in the world that they are as bad as terrorists themselves. In this politically self-serving scenario, freedom is equated with consumer choice. Likewise, our curiosity about why the imperial chickens came home to roost at the World Trade Center is diverted into marketable thoughts of Kentucky Fried Chicken dinners to be eaten while avidly watching the spectacle of competitive sports, rooting for "our" side in Iraq on the 6:00 o'clock news, or vacantly imbibing MTV's seductive non-stop commercial for music industry product.

Of course, if we're too afraid to step outside of doors to go shopping at a time when even our cell phones have become cameras, then we can just log on to E-Bay or turn on the shopping channel and bring the unadulterated realm of the market-place directly into our house where it seems so warm and fuzzy emanating from the home entertainment system in our living room. Or better yet, check it out on the screen in our bedroom, where the marketplace snuggles up to us, colonizes our dreams with disposable products and sexualizes our consumer fantasies. In this manner, our consciousness is saturated not only with the hype that surrounds individual products, but with the assumed inevitability of the capitalist economy as our most intimate environs are absorbed into the burgeoning space of the marketplace. To this home invasion can be added the buy and sell of commercial jingles, computer pop-up ads, and the corporate media's God Bless America propaganda all of which are so damn familiar that the

resulting alienation which we experience becomes oddly comforting in its predictability. We forget that even the overused term “thinking outside the box” was itself a commercial cliché in its original advertising context. Never mind. We are encouraged to drink deeply from the waters of oblivion and be sedated.

But, are we? Twenty-first century manifestations of the agoraphobic impulse can be alternatively understood as evidence that the tantalizing logic of the market can never be so pervasive as to be totalizing. All is not lost. Rather than dismiss those with agoraphobic sensitivities in apolitical terms, we should recognize their situation as being analogous to that of the unfortunate canary in the coal mine warning us of imminent danger so that we can get the hell out of there before it is too late. Just as paranoia can be seen as a heightened state of awareness, agoraphobia needs to be recognized as a distress signal that highlights social rather than individual causation. The problem is collective, and so is the solution.

As anarchists, we might be wise to recognize “the agoraphobe within” since the same oppressive social tensions which cause an agoraphobic reaction in those of us who are especially sensitive to them are by now internalized in everyone’s consciousness. Perhaps what is called for now is a radical reinterpretation of agoraphobia as, in essence, a refusal of the marketplace which can be seen as being akin to the refusal of wage slavery at the point of production and the refusal of consent at the polling place. Agoraphobia could then be recast as an embryonic cry of resistance to the terrorism of the capitalist marketplace rather than merely being seen as a halting whim-per of despair desperately uttered as the victim slowly sinks more and more deeply into the economic mire. From the depths of the quagmire, we hear the rising scream: “I am not a market!”

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #367, Winter 2004-2005

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