

SENSEMAKING: DAS NARREN SCHIFF 2

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The title of this column was a toss up between *Ship of Fools 2* and the *Son of Ship of Fools*, so I settled on the above. The legendary *The Ship of Fools, Das Narren Schiff*, was a social welfare technology in the 15th Century used by some European communities to solve their problems with the poor, the emotionally disturbed or anyone else they wanted out of their territory.*

Community guardians put those persons on a ship, paying the captain to take them down river to the next town and drop them off. It may very well be that some of them may have been ditched somewhere before that town, particularly if the down river towns paid the captain not to unload them in their area. On the other hand, it was reported that people often flocked to the docks when the boat landed to have a jolly time poking fun at the passengers. My dilemma about the title choice was not a flippant decision, but rather it was a troublesome reflection and a grim reminder that this kind of human disposal was not some obsolete artifact of days gone by, but a human tragedy, one that comes back to haunt us repeatedly. Calling those persons fools was a labeling process, which haunted them and condemned them to ridicule, abuse, and perhaps death.

In later centuries, poor persons or others who were unwanted might be shipped off to penal colonies, or sent to be indentured servants to "colonies" away from the mainland. Some lived short lives, others became leaders and or ancestors of citizens of new countries. But those were the not so good old days, and things like that are now usually unacceptable, except sometimes.

Some of my readers might recall a point in our not distant past when "Greyhound Therapy" was a practice of choice by states in various parts of our country. Persons, usually those on welfare, were given a bus ticket to another state and sent off to be taken care of

"up-river." Not by ship of course, but by an Overland Cruiser. Usually those up-river states provided more adequate welfare provisions, so perhaps sending them there eased the consciences of those in charge, who might have prevented such expulsions. But of course the main goal was the same as in the 15th century: get them out of our territory.

Once again, we face programs that reflect the Narren Schip mentality. Two projected programs in New York are startlingly reminiscent of those schemes. Remember, the people on the ships were not fools. They were persons with problems that the communities either couldn't or didn't want to deal with. Likewise, those enduring Greyhound Therapy on the non-stop buses suffered from poverty, not from foolishness.

New York City, like other large cities, has numerous persons with emotional troubles, and numerous individuals and families who live there are citizens without homes. Some of the problems are the result of drug use, some a result of the sensible (at the time) emptying of institutions with the intention of serving those persons in the community, but the funds to do so were never provided. The social causes are varied, but much of the problem is due to the lack of affordable housing, even for the working poor. New York City has done much to deal with these problems, but two of their efforts carry the heavy shadow and burden of the Narren Schiff.

One of the shadows came with the announcement that the mayor of New York has been investigating a plan to house the homeless on converted pleasure cruisers to be docked in New York City. "Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's new idea for New York City homeless shelters? Retired cruise ships—the discos and bars removed—docked at the Hudson or East Rivers." The cities commissioner of homeless services said, "In many ways they are ideal" (Barbara Stewart.

New York Times. Nov. 24, 2002. p.4).

Another reminder of the Narren Schiff approach had already taken place with the transporting of numerous citizens who were emotionally disturbed to sites across the Hudson River to New Jersey (not on boats of course), and to points further up the coast. Putting these plans together has the remaking of the Narren Schiff approach to "solving" vexing social problems.

Now, I am supportive of searching for creative solutions for persons who are homeless, and I believe strongly in offering services that meet the needs of persons who are mentally disordered, but will just any program do? At what price to the person? Are we at a point in society where we have lost the meaning of community and understanding that a "home" is more than a temporary place to live? "Home" needs to be close to schools and shopping, and to all of the services that all of us need

I can't imagine what the problems of living with a family on such a boat might entail. Is it very different than living in a "camp?" What freedoms are limited? Certainly it would be warm, dry, and food would be available. Recreation, like baseball for youth, might be limited, and transportation to work might be a little more difficult. Would the gangplank be pulled up at certain times? Would there be difference between first class and windowless cabins? Yes, it may be better than being housed in jails as some earlier plans proposed. It may also be better than putting families on some of the Navy "Mothball" fleet, or a barge that might house thousands. "Housing idea: USS Homeless" (*San Francisco Examiner*, Dec 30, 2002 p.2). What autonomy and self respect is left the person?

In an interview with noted psychiatrist Dr. E. Fuller Torrey in the above mentioned *New York Times* article, he offered the following observation about the Ship of Fools: "It's the idea of a closed world, cut off from civilization and populated by outcasts." Patrick Markee, senior policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless said, "Putting outcast people

offshore; there's something punitive about it."

Should we add to the isolation of those in institutions by ignoring the value of family and friends being able to visit their loved ones in those institutions, without having to travel from New York to Boston to do so? Distance aside, you might say, these people need care. Will they get it out of state, out of view, out of earshot, out of the coverage by the *New York Times*? Let's see.

"New York Exports Mentally Ill, Shifting Burden to Other States" proclaims the headline in the *New York Times* (Clifford J. Levy, Nov. 17, 2002. p.1). The article goes on to report the extent of the problem. The city is unable to care for its mentally ill. There are investigations of deaths, mistreatment, and lack of care within the city's mental facilities. Yet it may be even worse in some of the places these people were sent to in New Jersey and Massachusetts. Some were sent to nursing homes that are "problem-plagued," many without mental health credentials, and some that had been "admonished by New Jersey officials for providing inadequate care." One place in Massachusetts was "deemed so violent and disastrous" that they were threatened with closure. Why did New York state have people sent to these places? To save money, of course.

People must speak and act against the *Narren Schiff*-type solutions. We are not only talking of the many hundreds in New York, but the thousands in the U.S. that all people, and certainly social workers should be rescuing. **Yes! Rescuing.** "Not what social workers do," you might say. **RESCUING!** When the ship is sinking, that is what those of us who can *need* to do. It's what makes sense. If not now, when? If not us, who?

* See for example Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in The Age of Reason*. New York: Random House, 1965.

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