

## The 2003 Joanne Brown Seminar on Violence and its Alternatives

—Stephen Duguid

Last October the Institute hosted the third in its series of seminars on Violence and its Alternatives, the theme this year being ‘Technologies of Violence’. Funded by a generous grant from Joanne Brown, these seminars are held on Bowen Island at the Lodge at the Old Dorm, a comfortable Bed and Breakfast managed by Dan Parkin. Attendance is limited to sixteen participants and the seminar takes place over two days. This year’s seminar featured addresses by Richard Lee from the University of Toronto Department of Anthropology, Robert Menzies from SFU’s School of Criminology, and Joy Parr from the Department of Humanities at SFU. The other seminar participants were a mixed group of SFU faculty and people from the wider community, including a number of Institute associates.

This year’s theme had its origins in my own ongoing preoccupation with the increasing popularity of actuarial risk-prediction instruments in various social policy areas. In my introduction to the seminar I referred to the easy toleration of ‘false positives’ by the practitioners of risk assessment, the acceptance of pre-emptive intervention in social policy and even international relations, and the uncritical acceptance of technologies of surveillance. Sensitive to the need not to diminish the impact of the word ‘violence’, it was proposed to the seminar that these bureaucratic, political and academic ‘technologies’ were in many ways as violent in their impact as physical assaults.

Our discussion of this theme over the two days was organized around the three papers being presented. Richard Lee started us off with his reflections on a lifetime spent studying hunter-gatherer cultures. His paper, “Hobbes, Rousseau and the Ju|’hoansi: Reflections on Violence in the Longue Durée” (reprinted below) provided the perspective we needed in order to explore these modern responses to violence. Lee ended up on the Rousseauian path, arguing for an innate sense of justice in humans and, at the same time, acknowledging that human cultures must include room for and create appropriate responses to the spontaneous violence that is also part of human nature. Larry Green, one of the seminar participants, observed that we may have come full circle here, with our earlier desire to make justice abstract and impersonal as a means of breaking the cycle of revenge now being challenged by the demand to add a ‘personal’ dimension to justice not unlike the practices cited by Richard Lee.

Robert Menzies’s paper “Unfit Citizens and the B.C. Royal Commission on Mental Hygiene, 1925–28”

described the practice of trying to build “prophylactic walls around a degenerative gene pool... the screening of incomplete rationalities and... the sterilization of the feeble-minded.” In discussing these modern methods of coercion (what Michael Kenny in his response called “actuarial genomics”), Menzies reminded us of the “extraordinary capacity of people to locate a praxis of resistance” to such coercion, a resistance that he said came through clearly in the files of the patients he was researching. Here, technologies of control were clearly seen as technologies of violence and the paper pointed out in singular fashion the dangers involved if the state becomes an administrator of a new kind of actuarial law.

Joy Parr’s work-in-progress “Knowing by Taste and by Test, Distributing Doubts about Water in Walkerton, 2000”, examined the violence that occurs with the breakdown of a technology—in this case the means by which we ensure the delivery of safe water. Here, the focus of our discussions was on the tensions between scientific knowledge and local knowledge, the importance of the ‘social realm’ that surrounds any technology and the social organizations through which that technology is deployed. It was noted that local knowledge is multi-functioned, existing not only to insure clean and safe water but also to preserve the community. It thus possesses many functions, only one of which is to insure clean water. It is not specialized. Science, on the other hand, separates and specializes.

Throughout the weekend, the discussion kept returning to the ideas set forth in Richard Lee’s opening talk, the substance of which we are presenting here.

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Photo by Joy Parr

*Participants at the 2002 Joanne Brown Seminar on Violence and its Alternatives on Bowen Island, British Columbia.*