

## Short Takes

Some of the essays in Ripostejournal deal with biographical material which is not particularly new and probably not in urgent need of revision or updating. On the other hand public policy pieces and several others need “brushing up.” Here are a few examples of the latter.

### Battery Park City (February 2006)

While I gave the Park an enthusiastic review, I did not do justice to the various pieces of permanent and temporary art found there. Battery Park City even publishes a Guide to Public Art and sponsors various cultural events, sometimes focussed on New York City history or on the various ethnic communities which make up the City population.

### The Bear Who Let It Alone (December 2002)

In this December 2002 piece, I argued in favor of the concept of “commonweal.” This is a society which rewards risk takers and hard workers but does not turn its back on those who, often through no fault of their own, can not make a full contribution to the economy. With disapproval, I cited Lady Thatcher who said that there is no such thing as “Society.” Presumably she meant that there is the “State” which takes care of military and public security, highways, and fire departments, and look after other activities which citizens can not carry out themselves. Everything else is a private matter. I thought that her approach would produce a “jungle.” Wonders never cease. Our economy has become very jungle like and the powers that be feel quite comfortable with the trend. For example, Wal-Mart, which is the largest retail operation in the world by far, had a store in a northern Québec town (Rouyn-Noranda) in which the “associates” voted in favor of a union as a result of an election in accordance with provincial law. The company simply closed the store and put the employees out of work.

There was no messy business of goons beating up the union organizers or resort to any kind of violence, simply a message that at Wal-Mart employees did not have the right to organize. It happens to be a right for which some people fought and died fifty or so years ago.

### Off-shoring – the Worst Is Yet to Come (May 2004)

Much of this piece dealt with an insurance company in Montpelier, Vermont, which sent about 16% of its clerical work to be done overseas. It justified this move by saying that it was necessary to protect the jobs of the remaining employees. Since then the off-shoring business has flourished with some additional developments. A few people have noticed that sending work overseas tended to reduce middle-class jobs at home. As a result, off-shoring is no longer publicized but simply done. Off-shoring has not only increased in total volume but also in breadth. Lately, there have been articles informing us that law firms of a certain size are having some of their legal research done in India. This is technically not difficult. Most of the information required is provided on Internet sites for a fee, and once the fee is paid, the researchers in India are basically in the same situation as their colleagues in the U.S.A. and Canada, with the possible exception of those who work in Louisiana and Québec. Of course the operation will mean that hundreds, if not thousands, of paralegal jobs will not be created or will cease to exist at home. But not to worry. It’s just another adjustment in a wonderful worldwide economy.

### Two Museums (April 2004)

A retired engineer friend and I inspected the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario – both of which had just started to be transformed by two famous modern architects, Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry respectively.

We returned almost exactly two years later, ready to take photos and to make sage appraisals of the two projects. We found that the museums were in partial operation. A huge steel beam at an oblique angle pointing to the sky was obviously a part of the “crystal” which will become a significant part of the galleries at the ROM. Most of the exhibit floors in the existing ROM building were open to visitors. Only the ground floor of the AGO was open, but its new face was entirely hidden from view.

### **Free Trade/Fair Trade**

Since the articles on the above subjects were published, a great deal has happened in this area, and is too much to be reported in a Short Take. However, a development has occurred which does not fit into either the category of Free Trade or Fair Trade but is related. A Canadian, Dov Charney, believed that there is a “niche” market for clothing which is made under reasonable working conditions and wages but which costs considerably more than the imports. Consequently, a company now exists in Los Angeles called American Apparel which prides itself on making sweatshop-free clothing. American Apparel now has over 155 stores in 11 countries and revenues of more than 250 million dollars U.S. Unfortunately, the founder and principal shareholder of this privately-owned enterprise is a difficult fellow, has been in trouble over his anti-union activities, is being sued by three women for sexual harassment and has offended others with his frequent use of foul language. Nevertheless, I believe that his achievement, which has proved that it is possible to produce clothing in other than sweatshop conditions, clearly outweighs his unfortunate personality traits. As we have learned to our distress, there are very personable CEOs of large corporations who can not be trusted.

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