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Children of the Left

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Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

"It's not that I don't respect what my father does. It's just that my father doesn't live, and I want to live." The speaker was a lanky, red-haired fifteen-year old named André, one of a group of four teenagers drinking cokes in a neighborhood snack bar with me and a young teacher friend, Vanilda. The kids had at least one thing in common: parents involved in political activism of some area of the left, ranging from union organizing to leadership in popular movements to the direction of the PT (Worker's Party). As André complained, the political involvement of their parents often seemed to eclipse all other areas of their lives. "My dad eats thinking of the militancy, he sleeps thinking of the militancy. I bet he even makes love thinking of the militancy. Do you think I want this for me?"

Vanilda and I had invited the kids to discuss a program for filhos de militantes (children of political activists) at the Escola Nova Piratininga, a school linked to the labor movement where Vanilda worked and I had become involved as a volunteer. The idea for the program had arisen from a preoccupation among parents on noting that rarely did their adolescent children want to become militants* themselves. Rather than "continuing the struggle" of their parents, the children showed a tendency to back off from political activity as they reached their teens. André, whose father is a prominent leader of the opposition movement of the São Paulo metal-worker's union, described to me an occasion last year when his father called on him to go to the May First (Worker's Day) rally in São Bernardo (an industrial city outside of São Paulo, important center of union organization). André replied that no, he was going to play soccer with some friends. "My Dad nearly threw a fit. 'How can you forget the history of the worker's struggle' and all that talk. He made me out to be some sort of alienated youth, as if the world will come to a end if I don't go to a May First rally. I'm not alienated, I just wanted to play soccer, and that was that."

The event left a deep mark on both father and son. Several months earlier André's father, Vito, had told me the same story, from a slightly

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* The word militante in Brazil refers not to militaristic guerrilla groups, nor (necessarily) to advocates of armed struggle. It corresponds to the English "political activist", although it has stronger connotations than the Portuguese ativista, a negative term used to criticize those who engage in political action for action's sake, without ideological grounding.

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different viewpoint. The event had established a dividing line between the commitment of the father and the individuality of the son. When André persisted in his refusal to attend the rally, Vito realized that his militancy couldn't be imposed or handed down. While as father he could give his opinion, there wasn't much more he could do. "André has to decide for himself what he wants. If I try to force him, it just pushes him farther away."

A chance conversation in March of last year led to my participation in the project. At that time I was attending a congress of rubber tappers in the Amazonian state of Acre, and began talking with a fellow observor, Neto, a union leader from São Paulo. I mentioned that I was researching youth and he began describing the program with adolescents under discussion at the Escola Nova Piratininga, where he was one of the directors. Neto is the type of person who transmits to others his forthright enthusiasm about projects and in this way catches people to put those projects into practice. I soon found myself caught - eyes glowing, mind racing, interest thickening. After all, I myself was the daughter of activists, having gone to meetings and rallies since my infancy with parents involved in political education on issues of global interdependence.

As Neto described to me the difficulty experienced by young people in assimilating the political commitment of their parents, I remembered my own adolescence. While my early teenage years had been chock-full of political activities, when I reached college I went through a period of distancing from all kinds of traditional activism. At the time I reflected a great deal about my process of self-definition. While most first-generation activists acheive a rupture with parental values through their political involvement, their children don't have the same experience of discovering new ideas. If they become activists, they will become exactly what their parents want, and where's the rebellion or individuality in that? My apparent political withdrawal signaled a need to go after my own truths as distinct from the political expectations of my parents.

Noting my interest, Neto invited me to stop by the school to talk more about the project. Two weeks later I located the school on a side street of the busy center of São Paulo. I walked up a crowded wooden stairway to a set of simple but bustling offices overlooking a large room used for classes and meetings. I found Neto, who, busy as usual, introduced me to Leonildo, another of the school's directors. Leonildo is a pixieish middle-aged man with a very strong handshake. "Firme na luta?" he asks with warm attention, and when you say yes, adds "Isso é muito importante."* Leonildo undertook to give me some background on the school and the project with adolescents.

Nova Piratininga: "an instrument of struggle"

The Escola Nova Piratininga is an alternative project for professional training in the area of metallurgy and electricity. The school was created by MOMSP (Movimento de Oposição Metalúrgico de São Paulo), the organization that is currently trying to win the election for control of the São Paulo metal-worker's union, the largest union in Latin America. MOMSP is linked to CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores), the more radical central labor organization in Brazil, representative of what it calls "combative unionism". MOMSP hopes to defeat the current leadership of the union, which is affiliated with the CGT (Central Geral dos Trabalhadores), advocate of "unionism of results". The basic difference between the two labor organizations is that the CGT believes unions must work to improve the situation of workers within

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Translation: "Are you firm in the struggle? . . . This is very important."

capitalism, while CUT believes that a real end to the exploitation of labor can in the long run only come through socialism.

Leonildo spoke with evident passion about the school's philosophy and pedagogic principles. "Our goal is the re-appropriation of the knowledge of the working class. One effect of capitalism is the denial of the worker's capacity to own his knowledge, either about the technical work he does in the factory or about the society in which he lives. Everything is given him in a fragmented and packaged form, denying his creativity and his participation as a thinking being. We try to reverse this tendency by basing classes in the daily experience of each person, by stimulating creativity and critical thinking. We give student elements to analyze the society in which we live, including relations of exploitation and the possibility of a new society based on the organization of the workers as a class."

A descriptive bulletin given me by Leonildo refers to Nova Piratininga as "an instrument of struggle in the hands of the working class." The school was started in 1984, initially as a program for professional renovation of workers and union activists dismissed for participation in labor organization during the military repression. In 1986 it began to offer regular courses in professional training, soon accompanied by classes in humanities, mathematics and political formation, including such topics as the history of the labor movement and the Brazilian political situation. Classes were carried out by a team of educators coming from the social movements, the church and the unions. They developed a methodology based in what outsiders may recognize as "the ideas of Paulo Freire" (author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed), but which in Brazil has lost its narrow identification with the name of Freire and turned into a broader and well-rooted set of educational principles grouped loosely under the heading of "popular education":

> We reject the official and traditional education that has domination as its basic end, where the "control of knowledge" serves as a weapon that reinforces inequality between men. For us, there does not exist concretely "teaching", but rather collective learning, and in this process there is no division between theory and practice. There exists the thinking being, that discovers himself capable of creating and producing. This process of knowing is a political act of living and creating knowledge in the relationship between people. It works in the wholeness of the human being in search of "being more". It is a new form of production of knowledge and of relationship between people and what they produce.

The students of N.P. usually arrive with some sort of political background, ranging from hard-core militancy in the PT to the first timid approach of a factory worker to the unions. The school offers two courses: an 18-month night course for students who work during the day, and a 4-month, daytime "intensive course" for unemployed workers or activists hoping to learn an advanced technical skill. Students are indicated for the course by various organizations in which they have some involvement, such as unions, popular movements, the Worker's Pastoral of the church, or local community associations. These "collectives" agree to provide living support for the student during the time of the course, reinforcing the idea that "no one is a militant alone" as well as the responsibility of the student to a larger social group.

I had a chance to watch some of the opening classes of this year's night course. The first sessions were dedicated to the formation of the colletivo, a process of collective decision-making about basic administrative matters, such as scheduling days and times of classes, resolving a policy on

late-coming, determining student financial contribution and distributing tasks like making coffee and sweeping classrooms. This collective process is an essential part of the political vision of the school, setting the tone for the democratic methodology to be maintained throughout the course. Leonildo told me that the school hoped to "correct the vices" of the traditional hierarchical, authoritarian power structure within the labor movement, by training new leaders in methods of dialogue and democratic decision-making. Many students were disconcerted; this was the first time they had been asked to participate in such organizational matters. One interesting debate was over how to divide math classes, since levels of schooling ranged from nearly mathematical illiterates to those with secondary education complete. Would the more advanced students work separately from those with less knowledge (thus creating hierachy of knowledge, causing the "slower" group to feel less valued), or should everyone work together, those who knew more helping those who knew less?

In the metal-working workshop one could see clearly the link between political principles and pedagogic method. During an introductory class I joined a group led by Sergio, a long-time director and "monitor" (rather than "teacher"), as he explained the uses of the various machines. While describing the process of geometric drawing and hand "adjustment" to form metal parts, he asked the mostly male group of students if they knew how to bake a cake.

"Sure, if you give me a recipe," answered one student, as the onlookers exchanged masculine grins of complicity.

"We're going to avoid this business of giving recipes. If I tell you step by step how to do things, you won't understand anything. You have to learn how to think, how to get stuck, how to find a solution, from thousands of alternatives. And when you think, you begin to think you are someone, you begin to want more, to question. That's why at SENAI* they just give recipes. Imagine what would happen if workers began to think?"

As we walked around to the more complicated equipment, Sergio asked the students what was the difference between two lathe-style machines. "Well, for this one, you need to have more knowledge," answered a student. "You need to be a specialist."

"Oh yeah?" responded Sergio. "I'll teach you how to use this machine in five minutes."

"This I want to see," the student shot back, as the others, who had been intimidated by the more advanced machine, gathered around to watch more closely.

"In reality, there is very little difference between these machines. They all have the same function - stripping metal to form parts in the shape you want. What's the difference between using this machine and doing it by hand? The basic principle is the same. In this machine here, it's just a

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* SENAI - Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem na Industria (National Service of Learning in Industry). SENAI is a network of professional training schools developed and financially supported by a national coalition of industries. The schools, found in every small or large industrial city, offer free or low cost technical courses combined with a high school diploma. SENAI is the most common source of technical training for working class youth. Since the objective of industry is the formation of a well-behaved workforce, the topic of politics or labor history logically does not enter the curriculum.

matter of learning to hold the metal and regulate the measurements. There's no great secret. Anyone can learn to do any function in the workshop."

Sergio developed this idea further to bring out its political implications: "At SENAI, they teach you how to work with only one type of machine. It is in the interests of the boss to parcel out jobs, to keep everyone in his place. There isn't room for everyone to do the more advanced jobs, so they limit them to "specialists". By teaching the worker only part of the function, you keep him dominated. You diminish the function of the man in relation to the operation, to the machine, to the production. If not, he'll realize that "I'm me", and he'll start to want more."

According to Leonildo, Nova Piratininga uses one fourth of the time required by SENAI to train skilled workers, with a posterior employment rate of 80%, in comparison to 66% of SENAI. "That's because we give students more freedom to experiment and discover. They feel more at ease, use more creativity, understand more completely how things function. Afterwards in the factories they carry with them this valorization of blue-collor labor, which reinforces their class consciousness and strengthens their union organizing."

Activist families: a conflict of values

Although the school's project with adolescents is not directly linked to professional training, it emerged from a conflict the organizers noted between the values they promoted at the school and those they stimulated among their children. Not only did their kids rarely want to become militants; they rarely wanted to become blue-collor workers either! The discourse about valuing skilled factory work and fortifying class consciousness evaporated in their homes, where parents tended to encourage the idea of "rising in life" already dominant in youth culture. For most working class kids, even highly-skilled factory work is considered inferior labor, compared to their dreams of being engineers, lawyers, architects or journalists.

These dreams generate frustrations, since the economic conditions of most activist families put such professions out of reach. The teenagers are obliged to work during the day and study at night in the precarious educational conditions of the public school system. They have little access to culture or technology, and many times live within family structures that don't encourage dialogue or critical thought (and this even with politically involved parents, as I will describe later). As a result, they have little chance of entering the highly competitive free public universities, nor of paying the expensive, lower quality private faculties. They work instead in low-skill service jobs such as banks, offices and stores, ironically earning much less than they would in a factory, where strong unions push wages up.

In 1988 the directors of Nova Piratininga and of MOMSP began considering how to work with these two problematics encountered by their adolescent children: that of their estrangement from the militancy, and that of the tension between dream and reality in their professional perspectives. A series of meetings were held at the school among interested people, including some psychologists from the University of São Paulo. But while the group discussed the difficulties experienced by <u>filhos de militantes</u>, it did not come up with very dynamic ideas as to what type of project to develop. It fell into the old error of progressive educators, resolving to call the kids first and ask what they wanted to do. About a dozen teenagers were invited to several informal "rap sessions" to discuss the problems of being activists' kids and propose activities, which might range from cultural programs in São Paulo to some sort of professional training. The kids quickly perceived the lack of definition, as well as certain sense of being "coopted" for the

militancy. "We felt like guinea pigs," several of the kids told me later. "Like neurotic test cases that needed to be cured. They didn't even know what they wanted to do. I've got better ways to spend a Saturday."

A more successful meeting was held with a group of younger children from ages 9 to 13, who showed up unexpectedly at the meeting planned for older teenagers. Pre-adolescents are by nature easier to work with, due to the extroverted enthusiasm of the age. They also have less resistance to doing things their parents recommend, a point that already made the project suspect for the older kids. As the older group ceased to appear at meetings, the school continued organizing activities for the younger group, such as visits to science fairs, to the Latin American Memorial, and to the Planetarium.

It was at this time that I became involved in the project. We began turning our visits around the city into journalistic activities, bringing cameras and tape recorders to interview museum officials, talk with visitors, and photograph everything from historic buildings to the kids swinging like monkeys from trees. On returning to the school we turned this material into a newspaper, with the help of the graphics department of the local chemical workers' union, which invited the kids to see the whole process from composition on the computer to layout to offset printing. The kids also helped develop photos in the laboratory of MOMSP and in the second issue of the newspaper did the writing, layout, and part of the printing on their own. In short, the project has been "fun and instructive too", as one of the kids said, if occasionally tumultuous (imagine 15 twelve-year olds trying to crowd their way into a darkroom, or a game of touch-me-not carried out in a graphics studio with black printer's ink.)

But while the project with the younger kids gained momentum, the preoccupation remained as to what to do with the "real" adolescents who were, after all, the cause for the initial concern. The project now had the added difficulty of calling the kids back once they had gone away disillusioned. We recognized that the proposal would have to be more clearly defined if we were to attract and hold their interest. As we discussed possible forms for the project with the kids and other interested people, we were able to understand more deeply the conflicts experienced by activists' children.

1. Absence of parents

Among the younger kids, the most common resentment in regards to their parents' militancy is that "my Dad (or Mom) doesn't have time for me." As one said, "when I have something to discuss with my father, he says not now, I have a meeting. Tomorrow he has another meeting. Saturday he has a convention and Sunday night he has to go to bed early to distribute pamphlets at a factory on Monday morning. We end up never getting to talk."

Most activist parents, and especially men whose wives are not politically involved, do not set aside time to dedicate exclusively to their children. This corresponds, consciously or not, to the ideology of sacrifice and personal discipline within the militancy. Affective relations, along with all sources of personal pleasure, get relegated to the back seat in deference to the necessities of "constructing the Future". As a result the kids see the militancy as a source of deprivation of the relationship they long to have with their parents. In addition to seldom having time to talk, play, or go on outings with their parents, young children generally get dragged around to boring meetings where they are told to keep still or amuse themelves in the wings. They learn to associate politics not only with deprivation, but also with the impatience and tedium of never-ending meetings.

Some of the older youth whose parents were active in the resistance to the dictatorship in the 60's and 70's have additional traumatic memories of fear of separation from their parents. The 24-year old son of an important labor leader recalled the times his father would disappear all at once, either in hiding or in prison. His childhood was accompanied by a watchful tension and a fear of the police that was strongly felt, but never very well explained to the anxious child. "I always knew that my father could go away at any moment and never come back."

2. Contradictory lifestyles

As the kids grow older and more capable of critical analysis, they begin to perceive strong contradictions between the political discourse of their parents and their parents' personal practice within the family. They begin to perceive that the father who defends the struggle of the workers against oppression is a hard-headed dictator with his wife and children. Or they note that the mother who calls herself a feminist and goes to rallies of the women's movement comes home and does all of the housework alone, often making viable her husband's militancy while cutting short her own. Or else they see parents who consider themselves "liberal" in regards to sexual morality (including the father who has regular extra-marital affairs) become panic-stricken and prohibitive as their teenagers approach sexual activity.

In most cases the parents are completely unwilling to admit the existence of the contradictions the kids see so plainly. Their apparent blindness is due in part to the separation within the militancy between one's ideology and one's life. Ideological consistency is highly valued, but always in reference to an abstract and imaginary Future, and seldom to one's life here and now. Thus one rationalizes in terms of historical necessity behavior that the kids interpret as pure hypocracy. As a result, their parents' ideology loses its sacred aspect and becomes subject to questioning and doubt, much like the religious faith of more traditional families.

3. Political Moralism

An additional difficulty with parental ideology is the strong moralistic tone in which it is expressed. From an early age the kids receive a packaged vision of the world divided into good or bad, with very little space for questioning the divisions made by their parents. One young daughter of friends, six-year old Luanda, began interrogating her parents about whether given politicians, groups, places and activities were good or bad. On one occasion she received the answer that São Paulo's ex-mayor, Jânio Quadros, was "bad". Later she was discussing with her mother in the the car the uses of the bumps in the street to slow down traffic. Her mother informed her that they were good, since they helped avoid accidents. "Who put them there?" Luanda wanted to know. "Jânio built them," her mother responded. "But I though Jânio was bad!" she protested. Luanda also watched attentively the campaign propaganda of the presidential candidates. She questioned why her parents didn't like certain candidates; after all they promised to help children. "Isn't that good?"

Luanda's parents were an exception in that they encouraged and stimulated their daughter's questions. More often, the child's opinion is never asked, but the parents' point of view is expected to be unquestioningly absorbed. One mother forbade her child to sing a campaign jingle that the child particularly liked, because it was from one of the disapproved candidates. Only the "Lula-lá" of the PT was acceptable. Expressions of support for parents' political choices, such as wearing T-shirts, drawing pictures or

singing songs, are rewarded with praise and attention. The children's enthusiastic acceptance of such activities expresses their idealization of their parents, as well as their need for attention and approval.

As the children turn into adolescents, they begin to feel the opinions of their parents as an imposition denying their own possibility of expression. This leads to conflicts like the one described earlier between André and his father. When André preferred playing soccer to going to a Worker's Day rally, his father accused him of being alienated. André, who had heard all his life that alienation is the greatest of sins, showed considerable independence in resisting the guilt-pressure of his father. He did not want be alienated, but neither did he want to become a model of his father. When the kids stand up to the political pressure of their parents, they usually struggle with feelings of guilt left over from the childhood idealization of the parents, now moderated into a critical respect. "After all, my Dad is fighting to change the world." How can one be against changing the world? At any attempt to express his individuality, the youth risks the strong moral accusation of having failed in his social responsibility, and even of not being worthy of "future generations". This accusation can be a lot harder to ignore than the more traditional lament that current-day youth are putting the past to shame.

4. Crisis of beliefs

Linked to the difficulty of self-assertion is the self-doubt that appears when the kids realize that all of the "opinions" with which they explain the world originate not in themselves, but in their parents, in the PT, in the ideological parameters of the left. "Do I really believe all this?" they begin to question, with the risk of throwing long-held political assumptions into an anguishing turmoil. This doubt plagues even those who have not rejected the militancy, but sense a certain hollowness in the slogans they continue to affirm, like 17-year old Edmar, an active member of the PT who nevertheless admitted to me, "sometimes I wonder what I really think."

This difficulty is not limited to activists' kids, but is part of a deeper problem of ideology, which appears as pre-formed sets of ideas coming from "out there" that one adopts more or less critically as part of one's stock of interpretations of the world. With so many contradictory ideologies "floating around", it can be difficult for anyone to distinguish what "I think" from what one has adopted as part of external systems of thought. For activists' kids the relationship with ideology is made more tense by the fact that the kids did not "discover" their ideas (as their parents can claim to have done), but rather absorbed them in a more or less passive form, throwing into deeper questioning the activity of "I think".

To make things worse, the problem of ideology becomes entangled with the problems of adolescent self-definition and the need for a rupture with one's parents. This was what happened to me at Yale when I suddenly had to stop all traditional political activity and go in search of "my truths", as I put it to myself. My withdrawal was not so much a rejection of my parents' values as an inner epistomological struggle for the appropriation of my own knowledge. In this sense the conflict of activists' kids is similar to the one Leonildo described earlier in regards to the workers, who are denied the right to own their knowledge. Paradoxically, the traditional ideological orientation of the left reproduces the relationship of domination that it claims to reject. By discarding the distinction between "knowledge" and "I know", it turns knowledge into something abstract, static and transferable, independent of the subjectivity of the knower. As a result, the individuality of the "thinking

being", so passionately defended by Leonildo, is easily lost. For adolescents, concerned with the need for independence and self-expression, the apparent break with parental ideas becomes a break with an omni-present ideological mind-set that the young person experiences as more and more suffocating.

5. Life in the ghetto

In addition to these existential and epistomological difficulties, the kids experience the costs and benefits of living within the ghetto of the left. They grow up accustomed to a certain level of discourse and vision of the world that they don't find in school or among neighborhood friends. They therefore tend to form close bonds with other children of activists with whom they have frequent contact. This is especially true of children of activists in leadership positions, whose friendships often turn into a sort of shield that protects them from the need to confront other types of people or thought. In the conversation over Cokes described earlier, I was impressed by how strongly the kids emphasized their difference from the "alienated" kids who just like to ride skateboards or go dancing in clubs. They emphasized their "alternative" activities, such as theater, music and debates. They did their best to repudiate the label of "alienated" with which their parents threatened them, with the result of increasing the barrier between themselves and other youth.

The kids often have contradictory feelings about the status granted them by being children of political leaders. At the same time as they feel uncomfortable with the political postures of their parents, they feel a certain security and even pride in the association. It flatters, as well as irritates, to be known as "Vito's son" or "Leonildo's daughter". "Don't I have an identity of my own?" they exclaim in protest. But when they have to act on their own, they often experience an extreme insecurity, at times bordering on paralysis. Early this year 17-year old Vandré, son of parents involved in popular education, began to feel dizzy spells on the subway and an enormous fear of walking alone on the street or leaving home without his parents. I had a long talk with his father, Carlinhos, who was trying to support Vandré as he underwent therapy. Carlinhos attributed Vandre's crisis in part to the protective wall established by the militancy; "when the kids have to go out and face the world like anyone else, they enter into panic." He worried that a program for activists' kids would reinforce the tendency for isolation and relieve the kids of the need to confront other people and ideas. Was it a good idea to be strengthening the division between <u>filhos de militantes</u> and everyone else?

Designing the project: choice and communication

Carlinho's concern was echoed by the kids when they discussed with Vanilda and myself their ideas about the project. "Don't limit it to children of militants," they pleaded. "That would be a drag." They themselves felt the desire for new contacts that would take them out of the hackneyed mindset of the militancy and give them contact with fresh ways of seeing the world. Besides, a program limited to militant's kids would be more likely to have the hidden agenda of turning them into militants, and despite the kids' insistence that they were not alienated, this suggestion definitely turned them off.

After much discussion, we decided that while children of activists would still be our target population, we would open the program to other youth as well. Most importantly, we would avoid discussing the "problems" of activists' kids, since they had made it clear that they did not want to be treated like neurotic cases. We would also avoid the clichéd causes of the left; "for God's sake, don't show any films about El Salvador," they warned us. We would instead concentrate on the wider topics of youth in the 1990's. The objective of the program would not be to win the kids over to political involvement, but rather to examine personal options in terms of work, lifestyle, relationships and political beliefs. Within this perspective, traditional militancy becomes one possible source of lifestyle, but certainly not the only one in which one can combine self-realization with social commitment. We felt the importance of emphasizing the idea of personal choice, since it is precisely this element that is so often trampled over within the ideological framework of the militancy.

Once we became reasonably clear about our objectives, we set about designing activities capable of engaging the interest and energy of the teenagers. This was not easy, especially given the fact that we, as activists ourselves, fell into the habit of thinking that the solution to every problem is another meeting. We originally proposed a series of seminars and debates on such topics as sexuality, professional choice, technology, music and international culture, but then decided that seminars were too head-oriented for these kids who had developed strong allergies to meetings. Using as a model the highly successful journalistic approach we were using with the younger group, we considered ways to involve the older teenagers in similar types of hands-on production, possibly in the areas of newspaper, video, theater, music or the graphic arts. Such projects seemed to combine our goals of giving the kids access to technology and culture while at the same time providing and excellent means of personal and social reflection. The kids we spoke with seemed enthusiastic, and soon we were developing a proposal for a weekend encounter on the topic of "Communication".

The area of communication is particularly rich in responding to the various difficulties experienced by activists' kids (even while not labelling them as such). After all, it is not the schools nor the militancy that have the strongest influence in shaping the values of the youth of the early 90's. Mass communication in Brazil is strongly oriented toward youth culture, given the demographic weight of the 15 to 24 year age group. Kids are inundated with images of exuberant, white (or at most, tanned), financially well-off young people engaged in such activities as wind-surfing, cruising on motorcycles or frequenting expensive clubs. Images of high-level consumption fill the nightly "novelas" (prime-time soap operas), as well as the sophisticated propaganda of Brazil's booming marketing industry. T-shirts with English slogans, Rebok sneakers, North American rock bands and the English-tinged jargon of "surf and skate" establish a valorization of Western consumer culture and an idealization of the technological and financial possibilities of the United States: "there everyone has a VCR, right?". But this culture of marketing has the disadvantage of being extremely volatile and transitory; the sneakers that one saves two months' wages to buy on credit are soon out of style, making it difficult to maintain a steady sense of identity in relation to one's objects of consumption.

Thus when activist parents worry that their children (and they themselves) are de-valuing blue collar labor, they are really reflecting the rapid cultural and technological changes that have deeply influenced the perceptions and aspirations of their children. Working in a factory symbolizes not simply "low-skill labor", but also a return to the past, and a sense of missing out on the seductive possibilities of the computer age. Two of the most sought-after areas of study in the universities are those of engineering and journalism, both highly involved with new technologies. But Brazil's growing service and communications economy is growing at a slower rate that the desires of youth to take part in it. The opportunities for stimulating, creative work are extremely limited, open only to an elite. If working class kids have the good fortune to take a course in data processing, most will get stuck in low level digiting jobs that soon become just as rote as a factory.

The limited opportunities for creative work, together with a paternalistic, overly critical family and school environment that undermines confidence in personal choice, creates a crisis of "what do I want?" in young adults that transcends class divisions. In my recent conversations with friends of diverse social levels I have been impressed by the persistant re-emergence of the theme of not knowing what to do with one's life, accompanied by a deep and often bitter sense of frustrated potentialities. This frustration often expresses itself in the desire to travel abroad, to expand one's view of the world and/or seek better financial opportunities. I've recently begun joking that I will need to rent a plane to transport all of the people who have wistfully invited themselves along when I return to the United States in May.

When one perceives the technological and cultural transformations that are shaping the kids' view of the world, one can understand the force of their rejection of the static ideological categories of their parents. "The world is changing and they are still talking about Che Guevara!" The old myths have lost their power among the new technologies and social movements, which are causing an international revolution of the sort that Che never imagined. My impression is that an additional anguish of activists' children arises becauses they have, in fact, internalized certain values from their parents, felt most strongly in their rejection of the "alienation" and "consumerism" of wider youth culture. But they don't know how not to be alienated and participate in the stimulating changes that are making the classic leftist definitions of "transformation" obsolete.

And the left, as I have shown, certainly does not help matters with its de-valorization of individual thought and its ascetic inattention to the human side of its militants: affective relations, pleasure and sensuality, options based on personal vocation rather than the demands of the cause. In choosing the topic of communication we hope to develop the themes of self-expression, interpersonal relationships, and social values, as well as investigate the technological changes that are the source of so much interest and frustration. Our guiding motif is that of the adolescent's search for personal thought (the integrity of "I think"), individual vocation and creative expression, while participating in a group requiring the emergent leadership of all of its members. During the weekend encounter - and if all goes well, afterwards - we will work with various types of artistic expression (theater, radio,

journalism, graphic art) to give the kids an introduction to various technologies of communication. We will emphasize the individual's control of his media, and the the constant search for and creation of alternative uses of technology.

As I finish this letter the encounter is still in the planning stages. We have set a date for the end of March, and are currently discussing methodology and content for the event, which will take the form of a sleep-in weekend at some country location outside of São Paulo. We hope to use the encounter as a jumping-off point for a regular program, continuing to work with the theme of communication. Some possibilities are video or newspaper production, visits to television, radio or graphics studios, or artistic presentations on such topics as sexuality and youth culture. This project will be developed together with the teenagers involved, although we have learned the necessity of offering strong initial proposals in order to convince the kids that the project is worth the investment of their precious, limited time.

My only regret is that I will be leaving Brazil in early May and will not be able to follow the continuation of the project. Of all of the different projects with which I have been involved during my two and a half years in Brazil, this one has evoked my strongest personal and intellectual identification and my most passionate time and thought. I'm sure it has furnished seeds for future projects, since I intend to continue working with youth and education. And on an intellectual level, it has provided me with a unique angle of criticism in regards to the deficient vision of the human person within the classical ideological structure of the left. It points to one of the most demanding political, psychological and philosophical problems of our times: the role of individual consciousness in a visions of social organization and change. This question is at the heart of the re-definitions pulsing through both the communist and capitalist worlds, as well as at the heart of each adolescent's struggle to find a personal role within such rapid and confusing transformations.

Um abraço,

Ann Medina

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