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A Question of Participation

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Dear Peter,

I'd like to begin this first newsletter about youth and education in Brazil with an incident I observed two days after my arrival in Brazil. One of the sons of the family with whom I have been staying was giving me a motorcycle tour of the huge campus of the university of São Paulo, when by chance we noticed a rowdy congregation of students in front of one of the buildings and went over to investigate. The day before a group of radical students had tried to occupy some unused space in one of the university buildings, hoping to turn it into a student bar. The military police had been called in and six students arrested. In reaction this rally had been organized, mobilizing about 200 students, shouting their determination to "defend democracy".

Chanting "Fora Policia" (out with the police) the group of 200 invaded a meeting where the university rector (who had presumably called the police) was participating in a panel discussion about the future of the university. The students demanded to speak with the rector, wanting permission to use the space and a promise that the police would be kept out. After much haranguing and attempted containment on both sides, the rector got up to say he would not talk to the students at that time, as they were interrupting the conference, but would talk later with a small delegation. He then left, roundly booed. The demonstration, stripped of its focus, began to cool down, and after agreeing to recongregate in another place, the students drifted out of the hall.

Universities in Brazil have traditionally been a hot spot for militant action - during the 20 years of military rule in Brazil, which ended in 1984, the universities repeatedly erupted, often with violence, and often with violent response by the government. But what is interesting about this particular attempt at student participation is how limited it was in scope. One politically aware student I spoke with later complained that nowadays students in Brazil only get worked up about trivial things, lacking in social vision. This demonstration seemed largely provocative in nature, fueled more by the adolescent thrill of confrontation than by genuine anger. And even this self-serving rally (seeking space for a student bar rather than changes in university or government policy) mobilized few students, as 200 is in reality a small number for a university containing 47,000.

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All of which raises questions about the quality of participation in Brazil's three year old "New Republic", which is still trying to decide what it means by democracy. As the country's politicians wrestle with the writing of a new constitution, and finance minister Bresser wrestles with the country's creditors, the majority of the people seem to be surveying the possibilities of participation with a mixture of curiosity and fatalism. Do students (or anyone) have the political space to be provocative? Is the military really out of the picture, or is it just waiting in the wings? How far does the openness in the country go? Can provocation turn into genuine dialogue? Or will the sluggishness of a system laden with bureaucracy, corruption, and special political and economic interests sink the momentum of any movement of change coming out of the process of democratization.

I begin with this story not because it is typical, because for the most part the students I have talked to in Brazil have been markedly unpoliticized. But the incident does illustrate many of the tensions, limits, passions, and blindnesses operating in the country as it struggles with the meaning of democracy and its implication for education. It also provides me with lead-in to discuss the problem of participation in Brazilian culture, especially among youth, which has been the focus of my early impressions of the country.

#### Why I Am Here - 1

Before continuing I'd like to stop and introduce myself to those reading, so that you can understand why I am studying adolescents in Brazil and what I hope to learn.

My interest in Brazil originates in part directly from my experience as a teacher of inner city adolescents in New York and New Haven. As I experimented with various methods of teaching writing, and thus learned a great deal about how these students expressed the conditions of their lives, I was struck by the problem of participation faced by these teenagers. Not only did society fail to provide them with opportunities such as good schooling and employment, but the students themselves seemed to construct an internal, psychological barrier against participation in the standard sense. This was especially true of the more intelligent among them, whose self-consciousness, intensified in adolescence, seemed to complicate and accentuate the economic and social pressures of the city - unemployment, poor schools, weak family structures, and a peer culture based on drugs and materialism. The struggle for freedom and identity which is always part of adolescence took on a negative cast. Freedom for these students came to mean rejecting the positive roles set out for them by the "straight", honest side of society, and instead losing oneself (or finding oneself, depending on one's point of view) in the negative, underworld roles of crime and drugs, with the promise of excitement, risk, and easy money.

As a teacher struggling with these issues, and even earlier as a student of philosophy and psychology, I became interested in the ideas of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and educational theorist who had developed a radical method of literacy training called "conscientization" (conscientização) or "liberation pedagogy". Freire's methods, which he developed as a means of literacy training for Brazilian peasants and workers, seek to give the oppressed and alienated of

society the tools and the awareness to reflect upon their real social conditions and to actively participate in changing them. Freire's ideas have had a worldwide influence on ideas about both education and social change, particularly because he has helped to redirect social theory away from a mechanistic view of society toward a dynamic understanding of the consciousness of the people effecting and effected by social change.

### Paulo Freire and Conscientization

Here I'll give a brief summary of Paulo Freire's work, keeping in mind that I will be writing more about it in the coming months. In the 1950's and 1960's Freire, a professor of philosophy and history of education at the University of Recife, began working in popular literacy movements in Brazil. During this time he became concerned that education as it then stood was mostly a recreation of dominant ideology aimed at preserving paternalistic, oppressive social and economic relations and maintaining a docile, unquestioning populace. He realized that for people to look critically at the world, to become, as Freire says, "subjects" rather than "objects" of history, they would have to learn to view and articulate accurately the real conditions of their lives. He began to experiment with methods of literacy training which instead of using empty and foreign phrases such as "Eva viu a uva" or "A asa é de ave" (Eva saw the grape, the wing is on the bird), used words chosen for their concrete reference and their high personal and political emotion - such as "favela" (slum) or "comida" (food) or "trabalho" (work). These words could then be broken down into syllable groups and recombined to form other words, and in this way illiterates could in a very short time begin reading and writing.

Important to the Freire's ideas is the realization that not only are people "reading the word", but they are also "reading the world". The concept of literacy is broadened to mean a critical comprehension of society, an understanding which has pedagogical, philosophical, and political implications. First of all, the method requires a re-definition of the traditional relation between student and teacher. The learner can no longer be viewed as a bank waiting for the installment of information, a passive receiver of knowledge, but rather must actively participate in the creation of that knowledge through dialogue with others about the real conditions of their lives. For this purpose the teacher becomes a group leader and most importantly, a co-learner with the students. The teacher codifies the life situations of the learners into pictures and symbols and through dialogue stimulates the learners to decodify these situations.

This act of reflection on their own situations eventually leads the learners to a critical, rather than a "magical" consciousness of the world (hence the name, "conscientization"). It leads to awareness of the power to act, rather than just receive the actions of others. Using philosophical categories drawn from existentialism, phenomenology, marxist humanism, and even psychoanalysis, Freire discusses man as a being who works upon and transforms the world, who creates culture rather than simply receives culture. Once the human being is understood in this way, the educational task becomes re-oriented towards liberation - by which the oppressed becomes conscious of his own power to struggle against oppression.

Like liberation theology, which also has origins in Brazil, Freire's ideas have political implications. Freire describes his methods as "revolutionary", although he steers away from the ideological rigidity of many marxist reformers, and insists that the impetus and the context of social change have to come from the people's own interpretation of their lives rather than from a Leninist intellectual "vanguard". The method tends to lead to community organizing, labor unions, and populist action as people look for a social expression of their dissatisfaction and their newly discovered power to act.

In the years leading up to Brazil's military coup in 1964 Freire's ideas began to gain prominence in Brazil, especially during the populism of João Goulart's government. During the almost euphoric spirit of those times, in which many in the country became swept up in a sense of democratization and reform, Freire's ideas were widely discussed as a key to Brazil's social development. In 1963 the Ministry of Education began a nationwide literacy campaign using Freire's methods, which mobilized thousands of student volunteers all over the country.

This movement was cut short after the coup in 1964 which overthrew Goulart's government. Freire was jailed and exiled, and all expressions of his work condemned as subversive. He spend 16 years of exile in Chile and Europe, during which he wrote Education as the Practice of Freedom, Cultural Action and Freedom, and his most well known book in the United States, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed. His ideas have had a major impact on educational movements around the world, notably the literacy movements in Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and Nicaragua, among others. In the United States his ideas have influenced the labor movement, feminist theory, and black power activism, as well as educators looking for more empowering methods of teaching.

Freire is now back<sup>in</sup> Brazil teaching at the Catholic University of São Paulo, where I will be taking a course with him. He is also serving as a consultant to the Ministry of Education and to the current constitutional process in Brazil - which for me should make for interesting observations as the country encounters the difficulties in the application and implications of his ideas.

### Why I Am Here - 2

It is my interest in these difficulties which brings me to Brazil, and which serves as a link between my educational concerns and my historical curiosity. As a teacher I was fascinated by the possibilities inherent in these methods and ideas, but I knew from my experience the difficulties of using such an approach with teenagers such as I described earlier. Many of these teenagers seemed to be choosing freedom (and thus rejecting oppression) in the negative sense of non-participation or in the pursuit of material possessions. While Freire's methods imply a rejection of much of the social and political status quo, they also involve a very high degree of positive participation and action. They require an exchange of the ideology of personal protection and gain, which predominates among city youth, for the spirit of community responsibility.

But for teenagers it is very hard to sort out issues of social responsibility and individual self-definition. Self-consciousness and questions of independence and identity get in the way, complicated and confused by social pressures and today's barrage of media images. Both the age of adolescence and the educational, economic and political spirit of the times seems to agitate against the type of positive participation on which Freire's methods depend. Does this imply limits to Freire's ideas, which have grown mainly out of experience with adults? Or does it mean they have to be extended and rethought in order to respond to the problems of adolescents, and others, living in today's complex society. What forms of education would be necessary to give students the eyes and ears to live and act freely in a world characterized by oppression, violence, and distractedly rapid change?

Bringing with me these questions from my teaching experience, I am here in Brazil to study the limits and the possibilities of the movement in educational change emerging from Freire's work, particularly as applied to adolescents. I want to understand this movement in the context of the political, economic, and social changes involved in Brazil's attempt at transition to democracy. I don't expect to find that the problems of adolescents in Brazil are the same as in New York City, or that methods used here can be reapplied there, but I am interested to see how Brazil's political and social pressures on the one hand, and its educational methods (Freire's among them) on the other hand, react upon the built-in tensions of the age. During adolescence important choices are made, regarding conformity or resistance, alienation or participation, egoistic pursuits or community spirit. I am interested to see what kinds of choices Brazilian youth are making, especially about ways of participating in their emerging democracy, and how those choices are effected by different kinds of education.

As I described earlier, the issue of participation in Brazil is particularly potent, not merely for adolescents, but for people of all ages and classes.

Are the people themselves, long accustomed to authoritarian or paternalistic rule, ready for the conflicts and responsibilities of democracy? With this question in mind I'd like to depart from the explicit question of youth for the moment in order to describe my early impressions of the attitudes of Brazilians toward their country's political and economic situation.

### "O Povo É Burro"

Earlier I mentioned that the activism of those 200 university students is not the norm. That does not exactly mean that Brazilians are apolitical, but their political interest takes on a peculiar inverted form. Everyone is very ready to talk about how disinterested everyone else is in politics. "É que o povo brasileiro é burro."\* The first time I heard this lament was around a rowdy dinner table in the modest home of the elderly, middle class couple with whom I have been staying. For every meal one or several or all of their five married children in São Paulo (one is in New York) arrive to eat, confirming what I had been told about Brazil, that children never succeed in leaving home, unless perhaps they leave the country. This particular family informed me in chattering condemnation that all Brazilians care about is family, "futebol" (soccer) and

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\* "It's that the Brazilian people are stupid."

"novela" (the nightly soap operas which seem to be a unifying force in the country).

As I traveled around São Paulo talking to people of different ages and classes, I heard this lament repeated again and again. "O povo brasileiro é bobo, estúpido, ignorante . . ." It emerges into a general attitude condemning "the people" out there but placing oneself outside of "the people". A working class man who runs a small family sewing factory at the edge of a favela could have spent hours describing "the things I have seen . . ." The same goes for the wife of the wealthy director of an elite swimming school, who with characteristic Brazilian hospitality welcomed me into her home and spent the afternoon discussing religion and politics.

But while people condemn Brazilian disinterest in politics, nearly everyone has some commentary to make on the state of the country. As I ask whether things have changed since the the end of military rule, people almost invariably answer, "yes, things have gotten worse." This is by and large an economic judgment. Inflation has continued to increase, after the disastrous end of last year's Cruzado plan, in which prices which had been frozen for a year were released all at once, causing prices to skyrocket. Under the new Bresser plan salaries were frozen until September but prices allowed to rise slowly, and as a result buying power is diminishing. The loss of buying power has been accentuated by a recent law ending rent stabilization, allowing rents to increase by 300% in some cases. No one has been able to explain to me the purpose of this law, because most often they end up throwing up their hands in exasperation at one more example of the unaccountable stupidity of the government.

As regards the external debt, I was surprised to find that every Brazilian I have spoken to so far thinks that of course Brazil should pay its American creditors. "Quem deve tem que pagar" \*\* they say almost proverbially, showing little sympathy for the economic difficulties of the government. Mostly they blame the military for letting the debt get so out of hand in the first place, spending huge amounts on government salaries and superfluous building projects which remain unfinished for lack of funds. When I asked one particularly insistent man whether paying the debt wouldn't cause great economic sacrifice, especially for the country's poor, he turned vague but no less insistent - "well, the government should try to arrange things so that it pays the debt without sacrificing social programs." How could it do this? "It could be done if we had good leadership. Now, leaders are stupid, corrupt, playing games like children."

It is interesting to listen to the fatalistic voices of Brazilians as they condemn the stupidity of politicians and the people, as juxtaposed to the optimism and flurry of action projected nightly on television. Every night a good part of the news goes to cover the constitutional assembly, which is attempting to frame Brazil's fourth constitution and which is saddled with the contradictory task of providing a structure for long range stability and solving the immediate near crisis situations in the economy and politics (including the form of Brazil's first direct presidential elections in 28 years and the length of term of current president José Sarney, whose initial popularity has been sinking. Sarney took office as an unelected vice-president after the sudden death

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\*\* "He who owes has to pay."

of the extremely popular Tancredo Neves, who had mobilized democratic hopes in the country following the exit of the military, but died before taking office.)

One student at the Catholic University of São Paulo described the constitutional assembly as "uma besteira" - a grotesque joke. At the beginning of the process the government tried to involve the people, calling on small community groups all over the country - religious, educational, union, neighborhood, professional, etc. - to draw up lists of suggestions and needs to be considered in the constitution. And so hopes for change were raised at a grass roots level. But now the process is in the hands of the politicians elected as delegates to the assembly. The debate raging in the assembly is between "presidentialismo" and "parlamentarismo", the former of which would strengthen the power of the president, the latter of which would give more power to the legislative body by creating a prime minister to handle day to day business. The student stated the problem with succinct Brazilian irony: parliamentarism would be perfect if the congress could be changed, and presidentialism would be great if the president could be changed, but seeing as the constitutional assembly is dominated by delegates interested in preserving their own power and that of their political parties, neither of these is likely. So much for "order and progress" in Brazil.

Whose fault is all of this "besteira"? The Brazilian people, the people say, for electing such self-serving representatives, for being ignorant and uneducated, for listening to the sweet-talking of politicians, for not protesting abuses - the accusations go on and on, with no one placing himself within the realm of responsibility. It was "the people", for instance, who elected Jânio Quadros mayor of São Paulo, who people switch into English to tell me is "crazy". After visiting London he ordered all of the municipal buses painted red and introduced double deckers onto the streets of São Paulo. As the second to last president before the military government he prohibited bikinis, nail polish, and horse racing. In his younger days he was reportedly a good president and then governor, and was elected on the basis of his charisma with the people, but now he spends his days drinking pinga and is prone to making laws and then forgetting them. Dona Dulce, the mother of my family here who is a teacher in the municipal schools, told me that last month he announced to the newspapers and television that teacher salaries would be raised, but when paychecks came there was no increase, and no explanation given. As a result everyone in bureaucracy is a little afraid, as I have found out in trying to get someone to take responsibility for giving me permission to visit municipal schools in São Paulo, an experience which has so far proven to be a round robin of cross-references which at least had the benefit of introducing me to many parts of the city.

It was "the people" also who failed to become mobilized in the August attempt at a general strike, organized by the two largest leftist parties, the Workers Party (PT-Partido Trabalhador) and the Communist Party (PCB-Partido Comunista Brasileiro). But the fault also lies with the organizers, who instead of focusing on immediate economic issues such as salaries and working conditions, tried to mobilize the city workers around the abstract political issues of direct elections, democratization, and land reform. And so hardly anyone turned out for the strike, leaving the leftists with redder faces. Except for a few radical intellectual enclaves, democratic spirit in Brazil has not reached the level of political principles, staying within the realm of pocket-book

concerns. When I ask if the military government could return, I get mixed reactions. The family with whom I am staying insists that Brazil's economic crisis is so great that it would not be in the interest of the military to return. But others have told me that if the leftist parties were to start gaining control in popular elections, the military would probably return. The people would probably not protest much, especially remembering that under military rule things seemed economically more stable and buying power greater (although in the next breath people will blame the military for all of the current economic problems of the country.)

And so what I have seen thus far in Brazil is a population accustomed to watching a political process seemingly sluggish, irrational and corrupt, who have seen their hopes rise and then fall, who are prone to criticize from a distance but slow to act. After this rapid sketch of Brazil's political and economic situation, it should be clear that a pedagogy of the sort Paulo Freire proposes, with its focus on community participation, is going to face difficulties in its realization. But it is also true that it is precisely these difficulties - encrusted political interests, widespread fatalism, a shrugging off of democratic responsibilities - which account for the emergence of these methods at this moment in Latin American history. "Conscientization" tries to fight the fatalism of a people used to watching events happen without feeling the possibility of protesting or interfering. And so the manner in which Freire's ideas are received in this country will have a lot to say about the future of Brazil's democracy.

#### And What About Youth?

While I haven't yet talked much about youth in Brazil, I have given you a picture of the atmosphere in which children and teenagers are growing up. The activism of the university which I described earlier seems to be the exception - the teenagers I have spoken to thus far, mostly middle class, tend to idealize the United States, shrug off politics, and for the most part be struggling with their dependence on over-protective parents. But I will save a discussion of the experience of youth for my future letters.

I will be spending the next month talking to students and teachers in various schools in the city, after having braved two weeks of bureaucracy to finally receive in my hand the necessary letter of authorization from the Secretary of Education. I have already visited one struggling school on the edge of a favela, having been granted entrance by a courageous director who had no fear of the mayor. The students mistook me for the Princess Anne of England, who was visiting Brazil at that time, and clamored for autographs. After discovering their mistake, they were content to think that I was a friend of Michael Jackson. In my next letter I will discuss in more depth the problems of schools in Brazil. As for now I am introduced, to you and to Brazil.

*Ann Mische*