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Rua General Bagnuolo, 1026/06
Vila Prudente
São Paulo, Brazil 03152

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Understanding Dialogue

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Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

In São Paulo one frequently hears that Northeast Brazil is "another country". The word "Nordeste" invokes the image of scorched plains dotted with desperate farmers and their hungry children, more often than not tying their belongings into bundles to join in the migration to the industrial cities of the south - São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte. Or else, one thinks of paradisaical beaches, lush fruit trees, and "mulattas" dancing samba in the street at carnival time. This is the Northeast of the southern imagination, as polarized and stereotyped as the typical North-American idea that Brazil is either Rio or the Amazons, beach or jungle (with an external debt thrown in to top it off.)

These and other stereotypes of mine were challenged in the month I spent hopping between three Northeastern state capitals - Fortaleza, of Ceará, João Pessoa, of Paraíba, and Recife, of Pernambuco. True, I stayed in the capitals along the coast, and so did not see the much-reported "miséria" of the drought-ridden interior. What I did see were rapidly developing cities going through social readjustments, with a political scene very different from that of São Paulo. And I have brought back with me a series of questions about the political, rather than geographical, stereotypes I have absorbed in my year and a half of close companionship with the social and political movements in São Paulo.

Of the three cities, the one that provided me with the most yeast for questions was João Pessoa. This was because in João Pessoa I stayed with the family of a young, wealthy businessman, while in Fortaleza and Recife I stayed with friends involved in the PT (Workers' Party)*. While my discussions and experiences with "petista" friends will probably find their way into future newsletters, they did not really challenge the vision of Brazilian society I had constructed from my association with the PT in São Paulo. It was in João Pessoa that the problematic of worker/employer relations in a "maturing" society became tangible and complex, in sharp relief from the ideological simplicities of political factions.

* A key to all of the symbols in this report can be found at the end.
"Petistas" are members of the PT.

Ann Mische is an Institute Fellow studying youth and educational movements in Brazil.

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Cezar and his family live in a large, modern, bi-level house with a glassed-in living room, about three minutes from the beach and ten minutes by car from Tambaú, the "chic" strip of beach-side bars in João Pessoa. The immediate neighborhood is only partially developed. One turns off the asphalt road to pass along several sandy, pit-filled "streets" running alongside dug-out lots or half-constructed condominiums. Many of these buildings and houses were contracted by the construction company of which Cezar is the owner. The soon-to-be neighborhood supports one of my strongest impressions of the three Northeastern capitals, that of cities in construction. They are expanding rapidly particularly along the beach-fronts, where they cater to the tourists and the rising middle class, while filling the favelas and poor neighborhoods with workers from the interior attracted to the capital by construction jobs. Cezar's own house was constructed only three years ago, the first in the area. Living in the house along with Cezar, his wife, and his three small children, are two of his wife's sisters (one of whom, a friend from New York, had invited me to visit), three young girls to do domestic work (one to cook, one to clean, and the other to watch the kids) and a youth of 18 years to guard the house at night from the assaults that everyone assured me occur frequently in the area.

When I arrived my friend had already described to her brother-in-law my association with the PT and social movements in São Paulo. She thought it great fun that now I would be staying in the house of the "patrão" (boss). In addition to owning a civil construction company, Cezar is president of the syndicate of businessmen in civil construction, which would put him on the opposite side of the bargaining table from the union leaders I know in São Paulo. This gives him a central position in local economic power, especially in a expanding city like João Pessoa, which is an open field for the initiative of developers. Cezar also happens to be the cousin of the former president of the national Senate, as well as a recent candidate for mayor in João Pessoa, which shows his links to local political power as well. But despite these relations, Cezar insists that his family is not rich, that he started from the proverbial "nothing" and is (rapidly) working his way up. My impression is that this "nothing" is relative. While ten years ago he may not have had the money he has now, he certainly had access to educational resources that are denied to most Brazilians.

Rather ironically, the moment I arrived the annual television program of the PT was just beginning. Each year the government provides an hour of free television programming for each political party that wants to take advantage. The programs are aired on all the stations simultaneously during prime-time, and since Brazilians as a rule eat dinner with the television on, the program is hard to escape. This night the PT was giving an account of the many assassinations that have taken place this year in rural land disputes, focusing on last November's shooting of union leader, petista, and environmentalist Francisco Mendes, an incident that has received considerable international press coverage. I was finding the program to be gratingly melodramatic, and commented that it was badly done. Cezar looked at me in surprise. "I was thinking the same thing, but I thought it was because I disagreed with its political positions," he laughed. "I would have thought that the PT would capitalize more on the victory of Luiza Erundina in São Paulo*, where it has something new to say. Instead, they are just repeating the same old slogans."

* Luiza Erundina of the PT was elected mayor of São Paulo in November of 1988, a surprise victory that was significative for being the first time a woman and

It was my turn to be surprised. Was I sensing in him a certain sympathy, or at least, a degree of interest, in regards to Luiza Erundina? Did this mean he wasn't rooting for Erundina's government to fail, as most "petistas" imagine all businessmen are doing? Or was simple political astuteness behind his comment? Intrigued, I asked him to explain where he disagreed with the PT.

The problem, as he sees it, is that the PT only functions as opposition. "All they do is criticize, they don't construct. The level of dialogue in the country is at a very low level. Of course, that's not the fault only of the PT, but of the 20 years of dictatorship in this country. The great sin of the revolution of '64* was the destruction of the organization of society. Slowly we are working towards maturity. But we are still extremely backwards."

Maturity. The word leapt out at me because it is one of those ideologically flexible terms that opposing political factions will all agree is necessary, although they differ radically on what they mean by it. Suspecting that Cezar's view of maturity would be different from that of most labor leaders I know, I asked him what he meant by the term.

"Maturity would be what European and North-American labor relations have achieved over time. Workers and employers, labor and capital, each understand that the other has an essential role in the functioning of society. They establish relations based on dialogue rather than confrontation for its own sake. Brazil is still far from this sort of labor relationship. The problem with the PT and other groups on the left is that they don't understand the necessity of dialogue."

Dialogue. Once again a buzzer went off in my head. "Dialogue" is practically a code word in Brazil, especially among the forces of the progressive left, in which it invokes Paulo Freire's "dialogical" method of literacy training among the poor population, where the "oppressed" learn to read and write while discussing in groups the difficulties and injustices of their lives. In the process, those who promote the method hope, the people learn to criticize the powers that be and organize to defend their rights. It is also a foundation concept of Liberation Theology and the Christian base communities, in which groups, usually of the poorer population, gather to reflect on how biblical passages relate to their own struggles. It seemed out of place to hear Cezar using the word with such earnestness, especially to criticize those very sectors that use it as a sort of catechism. For example, in Liberation Theology, the poor must "dialogue" among themselves to gain consciousness and force in the struggle for liberation from the "dominant class". In Cezar's view, the workers should engage in dialogue with the dominant class, although Cezar would not call it that.

Such a strong clash in understandings left me with the question of to what degree dialogue of the sort Cezar describes is, indeed, possible between workers and employers. Socialist thinkers like Paulo Freire and most liberation theologians question that possibility, calling it at best a manipulation of the workers in accord with the interests of the "patrões"

a socialist hold power in the largest city in Latin America. Her victory was part of a sweep of victories of parties of the left in last year's mayoral elections, ^{which} ~~excluded~~ the center and polarized the country between left and right.

* The "revolution of 1964" was the euphemism the military government used to describe the military coup of that year, initiating 20 years of dictatorship.

(bosses). As Paulo Freire writes in his internationally known book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, "Class conflict is a concept which upsets the oppressors, since they do not wish to consider themselves an oppressive class. Unable to deny, try as they may, the existence of social classes, they preach the need for understanding and harmony between those who buy and those who are obliged to sell their labor. However, the unconcealable antagonism that exists between the two classes makes this "harmony" impossible."

Who is right here? Is the class struggle indeed an unreconcilable given of any social situation? Or, as Cezar implies, does the maturing of society mean that the antagonism between classes dissolves? Do the changes in the modern, international economy mean that the divisions between oppressor and oppressed no longer apply? Or have they merely become more subtle, diffuse, and hard to define? Underlying these questions is the more immediate one: how does one understand the meaning of social dialogue in a country like Brazil, with on the one hand its huge sub-literate population, and on the other, its rapid technological advances? These were the questions in my head as I sought to sort out the ideological convergences and divergences in current business/labor relations in Brazil.

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The first thing to understand about the changes in Brazilian labor relations is that neither business or labor is unified in its understanding of the possibility of dialogue. While I was already aware of the strong internal divisions in the labor movement, my conversation with Cezar made me aware of similar divergences within the business community. Cezar, as he himself describes, is part of a growing group of "empresarios novos" - younger business leaders who are separating themselves from the hard-line rhetoric of the traditional economic right. As part of their discourse on modernization and responsibility, they seek what Cezar describes as "the middle course", against extremisms of the right and left. Going a step further, Cezar told me, "I am more afraid of the extreme right than of the left in Brazil today. The left is part of the process of renovation and maturing of society. The extreme right works against this process. What we want is a strengthening of the center."

What is this "center" that Cezar refers to? Defining the center in Brazil is a tricky business because almost no one refers to himself as from the "right". During the constitutional assembly, the conservative block that united to oppose the more progressive measures of the initial constitutional text referred to itself as the "Centrão" (meaning, "big center"). Many of the same politicians, along with economists, businessmen, and intellectuals, are presently uniting to form a new force, called the "Democratic Convergence", with the purpose of unifying politically and ideologically behind a candidate of the "center" in the presidential election of this coming October, to oppose the two strong candidates of the left, Luis Ignacio da Silva (Lula) of the PT and Leonel Brizola of the PDT. The group is ideologically diverse, ranging from those who call themselves "liberals" (in the classical economic sense) to those who call themselves social-democrats, and including a good number of public figures who held important posts during the military years. The rather flamboyant exception to the rule that "all roads converge at the center" is that of the UDR, the union of rural land-owners that has taken on itself the explicit role of ideological articulator of the far right. The UDR is the only conservative force that openly admits that it is involved in a "class struggle", defending free enterprise and fighting threats to land-holdings coming either from agrarian reform, or as is more likely, from the invasions of rural workers who have tired of waiting for it.

But Cezar's wariness of the right is not limited to the UDR. It extends also to the old guard of businessmen, consolidated in what is known as the "grande familia". The term refers not only to the passage of property and businesses from generation to generation, but more importantly, to the close ties of business with government, which has traditionally supported business with subsidies, concessions, protective import policies, and, more often than not, opportunities for corruption. These businesses, in turn, support the politicians, and in this way the country has proceeded for decades, if not centuries.

The younger group of business leaders wants to break with this tradition. On returning to São Paulo I searched through old magazines and newspapers for other articulations of Cezar's position, and discovered a sizable scattering of reports, editorials, and interviews on the subject. These younger businessmen have formed a divergent sub-group within the powerful FIESP (Federation of Industries of São Paulo). They call this sub-group the PNBE (National Thought of Business Bases), with the purpose of serving as a modern-minded, internal critic of FIESP and traditional business practices. For example, the newer, questioning attitude can be heard in this rather sarcastic article by a 26-year old business owner (who, incidentally, happens to have a degree from the Harvard school of administration): "If the business community has used all its astuteness and native competence to take advantage of protective tariffs, special subsidies, corrupt governors and abundant misery, could it be that it is not capable of facing the new challenge? The challenge of being modern, honest, participative and competent?"

The principle banners of these young business leaders begin, as this writer indicates, with a criticism of the system of patronage, corruption, and manipulation on which the business community has been based. The buzz words are honesty and responsibility, terms that must be understood in opposition to the traditional lack of public accountability in a system where laws are respected if they have the good fortune to "stick" (and even then, not so very respected), and crimes ranging from corruption to assassination pass more often than not with impunity. Linked to this is a rejection of the traditional protective role of government in economic life. Part of this attitude springs from the classical liberal capitalist position that "the less government, the better", and essays on the subject often read like a Milton Freidman column.

But here in Brazil there seem to be several historical factors that distinguish the discourse from that of our friend Milton. First, the vice of government dependency is so ingrained, and the government management of state-run businesses, such as airlines and utilities, has been so disastrously bureaucratic, inefficient, and deficit-producing, that some degree of government cut-back is defended even by those ideologically leagues apart from Freidman. For example, in an editorial defending the modernization of the state, the president of FIESP, Mario Amato, admits that the free market system has limits in a country like Brazil: "Can we walk towards neo-liberalism English style without first passing through a welfare state that attenuates to some extent our shouting social inequalities? . . . The business community does not think that we can olímpically depart for an ultra-liberalism à la Thatcher or Reagan. We only think that a needy society cannot stay indefinitely paying mastodonic state that insists on acting where it shouldn't and omitting itself where its presence is necessary."

A second historical factor that distinguishes this discourses from classical "first world" liberalism is the still fragile organization of civil

society, as a means of both providing services and demanding accountability on the part of authorities. Most classical free-marketers in Brazil would like it to stay that way, at least in terms of such entities as labor unions, professional organizations, and public interest groups, which tend to "interfere" in the market. But these younger business leaders reject the traditional conception that the less society is organized, the better for business. They oppose repressive labor policies and join in the call of the more progressive sectors for the strong organization of civil society, as a means of assuring both the stability of democracy and the relative "humanization" of capitalism. This includes, evidently, the recognition of the necessity of labor unions as a means of organizing workers to express their needs and desires. Of course, they would like to see this function carried out not in shock with the "patrão", but as part of the "responsible" resolution of social problems.

An extension of these concerns is a re-evaluation of wage policies, which have historically been based on suppressing wages to lower costs and better serve the international market. For example, the following appeal by the Harvard graduate quoted earlier would seem like heresy to most traditional businessmen: "Let's pronounce ourselves in favor of a gradual, strong, and continuous rise in the minimum wage. Let's exercise participation and democracy inside our firms, and not preach the old false history of the 'grande familia'." As the new field of "human resources" enters Brazil from places like, among others, Harvard business school, there is a growing recognition of the practical necessity of paying a decent wage and of creating participatory, reciprocal relationships within a firm or factory. As Cezar told me, this is not because he and others like him are "bonzinho" (do-gooders). "It's because when workers are happy and well paid, they produce more. It's a question of profit."

The business community has also begun to recognize the fact that without workers who earn decent wages, there are no consumers to buy products. There is a growing analysis that profits can be increased (and democratic stability better served) by expanding the internal market, rather than squeezing the most possible out of low-paid workers. The national magazine, Isto É/Senhor, linked internationally the The Economist, best represents this modern viewpoint: "Until what point is it possible to maintain a strategy of selling little to who earns little, with salary levels among the lowest in the world? Is it in this way that one constructs a modern and democratic society? Until what point can one deepen the disillusionment of the people, where, even in a society like Brazil, there exists a contingent with a reasonable level of information about the reality of things?"

The editorial goes on to state succinctly, "Without salary, employment, and instruments of social protection, there is no internal market. Without an internal market, there is no investment. Without investment, there is no production. . . After so many years of backwardness, it won't do to stayed tied to the false dilemma that one needs to produce first to distribute afterwards, that is, in the next century. Who has the modern sentiment knows this."

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But while these emerging young business leaders gradually alter the tone of worker-employer relations, they have a long way to go before they win the trust of the unions. The reasons for this are both practical and ideological. Much like the business community, the labor movement is divided, to oversimplify things a bit, between the hard-liners and the conciliators.

There exist two principle labor "centrals" (union federations, like the AFL-CIO). The older and more moderate of the two, the CGT (Central Geral dos Trabalhadores) preaches what is known as "unionism of results". This means that the unions stick to issues of salary and working conditions and stay away from broader political issues, such as, for example, the question of the repayment of the external debt, land reform, and criticism of the capitalist system. Although the CGT declares itself to be apartisan, most of its leaders are members of the PMDB (a moderate, centrist umbrella party). The CGT represents more or less the type of labor organization that Cezar and the young business leaders want to strengthen. There is little shouting, everyone knows his place, and negotiations are based on a certain form of "dialogue".

The other labor association, CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores) represents what it calls "combative unionism". It was founded in 1983 by many of the same labor leaders who four years earlier had been involved in the foundation of the PT, growing out of a wave of hard-fought metal-worker strikes in the São Paulo industrial region. Although CUT emphasizes its independence from political parties, and includes non-petistas in its leadership, the organization maintains close ideological ties with the PT. Like the CGT, unions affiliated with CUT fight for better salaries and working conditions, but they insist that the struggle cannot stop there. They accuse the leaders of the CGT (and the affiliated unions) of supporting directly or indirectly the interests of the employers and of the capitalist system. According to the president of CUT, Jair Meneguelli, "The difference between the union leaders of CUT and those of the CGT is that we have long passed the phase of believing that the "patrões" (bosses) could be concerned about our financial situation. We have long stopped believing possible any harmony between labor and capital. We have long stopped believing that it is possible to live in a capitalist country without stating explicitly the class struggle. Unfortunately, the leaders of the CGT, intentionally or mistakenly, still reason in this manner."

In accord with this position CUT refused to participate in the attempt at a "Pacto Social" of last November, an anti-inflationary accord between business leaders, union leaders, and government that tried and failed to slow inflation by controlling prices, wage adjustments and fiscal policy. CUT justified its abstention by declaring that "there is no pact between non-equals".¹ That the pact was nothing more than "a farse that would serve to elaborate a new salary proposal against the workers."* Any genuine pact would, according to CUT, have to include proposals for salary recuperation and a national work contract, as well as discussions of non-payment of the external debt, combatting the public deficit, and realization of land reform. Since the government and business leaders were not interested in discussing any of these questions, CUT left the negotiations to the CGT and its "unionism of results". The CGT ended up politically discredited by this attempt at "dialogue", because so many of the terms of the pact were not respected by business or government, and inflation continued to rapidly swallow salaries. On the other hand, CUT's tough-fisted attitude, together with growing representation and negotiating ability, are strengthening CUT's national leadership.

* Paulo Freire, in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, expresses clearly this view of such "pacts": "Within certain historical conditions, manipulation is accomplished by means of pacts between the dominant and the dominated classes - pacts which, if considered superficially, might give the impression of dialogue between the classes. In reality, however, these pacts are not dialogue, because their true objectives are determined by the unequivocal interests of the dominant elites. In the last analysis, pacts are used by the dominators to achieve their own ends."

It should be clear that that proposals for a humanized capitalism coming from Cezar and other young business leaders will be greeted with various degrees of suspicion on the part of the labor movement. With CUT, there is a clear ideological barrier. The social proposals of the new businessmen still represent exploitation, even with its new human face. And even with the conciliatory approach of the CGT, the systemic antagonism between employers and workers runs deep, and leads to clashes at the gut level. Cezar described to me a recent strike by the construction workers of João Pessoa in which he, as president of the syndicate of company owners, had to serve as principle spokesman of the "patrões". The strike, organized by a union affiliated with CUT, was aggressive in the tradition of "combative unionism". As representative of an organization that contained members more conservative than himself, Cezar had to take positions that were more "hard-line" than he would have taken personally. But he tried to maintain a climate of dialogue and felt personally affronted by the aggression of the strikers. According to Cezar, the strike included such incidents as the contamination of the water supply of those who continued working, as well as physical aggression toward strike-breakers. Cezar himself received physical threats as well as verbal insults. This sort of behavior on the part of the unions he found unacceptable. "I don't threaten anyone, and I don't accept that they threaten me."

At this point in the conversation he stood up and looked straight into my eyes to emphasize the force of his position. "I don't accept that I am guilty for creating 2000 jobs. I don't accept that I am the enemy for providing this service to society. The enemy is not me. It is inflation, government incompetence, a social and economic system based on inequality, and the low cultural level of the people. The immaturity of the unions is that they still point to me as the enemy."

Cezar attributes much of the antagonism of the strike to the low educational level of the workers. The construction workers he hires are mostly poorly educated men from the interior of the state who come to the capital in search of work. Often they are illiterate, or have only a few years of schooling. The nuts and bolts of training they receive on the job. And given their weak educational foundation, there is little chance for them to do technical courses to improve their level of qualification and earn more than the minimum wage. "They don't have the capacity to understand the complex social problems behind their suffering. All they know is that their lives are miserable, and they throw the blame on me."

I suggested to him the response CUT would give to his analysis, that their anger came not simply from a partial understanding of reality, but also from a real experience of exploitation at the hands of traditional "patrões", whose method of profit-making was, in fact, based on squeezing to workers dry. Even in his case, where he had at least the beginnings of an understanding that one must treat workers with decency in order for them to produce well, the inner revolt born of years of oppression was still there. And looking more deeply, paying a "decent wage" did not mean that the relation of exploitation had ended. The workers were still capable of sensing the injustice of a situation in which his profits and wealth were being accumulated on the basis of their work.* In the view of the unionists related

* Freire quotes Bishop Francis Split at a 1967 Mexican conference on this point: "If the workers do not become in some way the owners of their labor, all structural reforms will be ineffective. (This is true) even if the workers receive a higher salary in an economic system but are not content with these raises. They want to be the owners, and not the sellers, of their labor."

to CUT, this situation can only be corrected in the long run by a socialist restructuring of society, in which the workers control the means of production.

Cezar rejected this possibility on cultural grounds. "Today in Brazil there don't exist conditions for things to be different. How are people with such a low educational and cultural level going to run businesses, create jobs, as I am doing? They are used to having all of their decisions made for them. They don't understand the meaning of responsibility. That's not their fault; it is simply outside of their experience."

He added, "It's easier for me, as the "patrão", to break the class barrier and come down to their level, than for them to come up to mine." He told me that he had spent hours playing chess with workers when he visited his home town in the interior. "That way you challenge them to grow, to become responsible. They won't do that on their own."

As an example, he described a recent project in land redistribution outside of João Pessoa. In accordance with their demands, each person in the community had received his plot of land. The project was a disaster because the people could not succeed in producing anything. Within a year the project had deteriorated into fights over who had rights to what plots. On the other hand, Cezar was presently involved as a consultant in a government-sponsored project of cooperative farming. The infra-structure and the technical training were supplied by the government, in collaboration with businessmen such as himself. "This type of project I believe is excellent. But the idea that the workers in general have conditions to take over the means of production in this country is simply absurd."

The problem with groups like CUT and the PT, he said, was that they took ideological positions against the system without looking realistically at what concrete steps would be needed to change it. For example, he asked, "why don't the unions offer technical courses for their members? Then at least the workers would be able to bargain their technical competence in exchange for higher salaries, and the interests of society as a whole would be served."

In regard to capitalist exploitation, Cezar admitted that on the question of accumulation of profits, we had, in fact, reached a barrier to dialogue. Humanized or not, the rock-bottom of capitalism was profit-making. But, he challenged, "why don't those in the PT and CUT practice what they preach about participation and distribution of profits, by setting up cooperative businesses based on those principles? They they could enter into business associations together with me and work to change the present situation. They would be working to construct society rather than simply oppose it."

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On returning to São Paulo I took these last two questions to a friend of mine, Moises, who is the director of the well known CPV (Vergueiro Pastoral Center) a center for research and documentation on popular movements in Brazil, with a focus on the workers' movement. He is also one of the local leaders of the PT and has worked with the "Pastoral Operario", the church ministry that accompanies the labor organizations.

In response to the question of why the PT doesn't set up alternative, cooperative businesses to "practice what it preaches", he said, "It seems to me that this businessman is ingenuous, on two counts. First, he doesn't understand that we don't want to participate in the system. We want to break

with it. We don't believe the current injustices can be corrected by reforming capitalism, but only with a radical restructuring of society. Second, does he really think that the business community would let such a cooperative enterprise survive? The system is based on exploitation, and participatory enterprises threaten that system. The discourse of these new businessmen might be the most humanistic possible, but in the end you still have exploitation. The difference is that now they are developing more subtle ways of manipulating the workers."

As for the question about technical training, Moises responded, "We believe that technical training is not the responsibility of the unions. It is the responsibility of the state. Our role is not to make the system work better. Our role is to develop the class consciousness and political organization of the workers." While the unions don't offer the technical courses Cezar would like to see, they have developed whole programs, or more accurately, environments, of what is known as "political formation". There exist periodic debates, discussion groups, courses, films, booklets, etc., directed both toward workers in firms and factories, and more importantly, for activists and leadership. These wide-ranging debates include discussions of the nature of capitalism and socialism, critical analysis of countries such as Cuba and Nicaragua, historical accounts of the Brazilian labor movement, and debates about the relationship between the popular movements and the political parties, among other topics. All of these debates make up the culture of the left, and when one is inside of this culture, questions of the type made by Cezar do indeed seem ingenuous. That's not to say that there isn't considerable internal disagreement and debate within the left; there is plenty. But even the divergences stay within certain ideological parameters, in which Cezar continues to represent the oppressor.

But despite the ideological barriers, the changed attitude toward labor relations emerging among younger business leaders like Cezar is beginning to have an impact on the labor movement. Moises confirmed that with the new type of patrão, who understands the importance of human relations and decent wages in augmenting production, it becomes much harder to organize the workers. The traditional ideological discourse of the unions often works against them, because, after all, most workers don't want socialism. They want stability and buying power, and there they have something in common with the boss. And if the boss isn't himself a son-of-a-bitch, it is very hard to see the system as one. The labor movement is beginning, slowly, to look for modern ways to respond to modern capitalism. But old ideologies die hard, and as of yet Moises couldn't tell me what those ways are.

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The confrontation of social visions I've described here poses, at first glance, a false question. Is Brazil developing into a stable capitalist democracy on the western model, as Cezar and the young businessmen of this newsletter hope? Or, in accord with an alternative view of maturity, is the consciousness of the oppressed classes ripening to the point that they reject exploitation and take political and economic power into their own hands?

By reducing the conflict to an either/or, based on the opposition between two imported models, one understands very little about the political situation in Brazil. Such a reduction in vision is the problem with all conceptual straitjackets, and a special weakness of the left. The value of my discussion with Cezar was not only to provide insight into modern business thinking, but to spotlight the ideological borders (fences and frontiers) of the proposals of the Brazilian left in which I have been involved for the past year.

And so, rather than choosing which social vision is "right", I am left trying to understand how the conflict between them contributes to the political and social dynamic now in Brazil. The first surprise is that in the short-term, the two visions find a point of convergence. Although the left continues heatedly to debate the nature of socialism, it has pretty much reconciled itself to the fact that "the revolution" is not for now, and that it must carve out space within the "bourgeois democracy" that it continues to criticize. The PT and other parties of the left have entered mainstream politics in these years of democratic transition, playing an important role in the writing of the new constitution and recently winning important mayorships around the country. Modern-minded businessmen like Cezar are watching these administrations with strong interest, with a special eye for that of Luiza Erundina in São Paulo. Although they worry about the nationalistic, state-centered discourse of the PT, they see Erundina's government as part of the construction of the type of democracy that would serve their interests. And Erundina has met them halfway on the proposal, backing away, at least momentarily, from the goal of socialism and declaring that her goal is to run a government that is "transparent, competent, and democratic." What that means is still highly uncertain, but the ethical commitment of Erundina is clear, and that itself is a novelty in Brazil. As Cezar commented to me, "Erundina and those like her will have an important contribution to make in the maturing of society. She will shake up the corruption, stagnation, and bureaucratic incompetence of the system and experiment with new solutions to old problems. Other political leaders will learn a lot from the experience."

Of course, the left is not completely comfortable with its new role inside the system, and is currently wrestling with the question of whether it is adopting a reformist, social-democratic attitude at the expense of its long-range, revolutionary goals. And, on the other hand, if business leaders are prepared to learn from Erundina, they are not eager to see her government a flying success, since that would pave the way for the victory of the PT's candidate, Lula, in this year's presidential elections, a victory that the diverse forces of the "center" agree would be a disaster. The short-term convergence falls apart when one analyses long-term objectives. Both sides want democracy - Cezar, because a stable, "mature" democracy is good for economic development and ultimately, for profits; the left, because democracy allows it, as the jargon goes, to "accumulate forces" through the concientization and organization of the people, in order to resist the manipulations of bourgeois democracy and construct in its place democratic socialism (which, the debate goes, is neither social-democracy, Western European style, nor the authoritarian socialism of the Soviet bloc. What it is, no one is quite sure.)

Similarly, everyone would agree, superficially, that a strong democracy requires an educated populace. Cezar, if you remember, raised the problem of Brazil's vast sub-literate population as the main obstacle to mature labor relations of advanced capitalism; and on the same basis, rejected the possibility of a socialist revolution in Brazil. The conflict arises when one asks who will control that education, and along what political lines. I believe that the educational question is the crucial remainder of this discussion, showing clearly the dispute for ideological hegemony within Brazil's emergent democracy.

On one side, one sees the growing initiative of the business community in the educational field. In response to the modernization of the economy, along with the dramatic failure of the public school system to provide basic literacy, let alone professional preparation, for the majority of the population, the national federations of industry and commerce have established

two organs, SENAI and SENAC, (National Service of Industrial/Commercial Learning) that offer technical courses for free or at low cost, while the organs SESI and SESC (Social Service of Industry/Commerce) provide literacy training and recreational programs. While such widely used programs adopt a stance of being merely technical and recreational, not political, they have the hidden political agenda of forming workers to serve as "responsible participants" within the capitalist system.

The educational projects emerging from the left place themselves in direct opposition to this proposal. There exists a growing national network of what is known as "popular education", emerging out of 30 years of community work among the poorer population, centered mostly in the base communities of the Catholic church. These projects have developed a distinct methodology and a well-articulated philosophy, strongly influenced by Paulo Freire's method of literacy training and the accompanying theory of community dialogue and resistance to oppression. Rather than helping the poor adapt to capitalism, these projects seek to develop in the poor a sense of their own value, a call for community participation, a critical view of the system and the political organization to change it. They reject Cezar's thesis that it rests with those in power to break the class barrier and help the poor to rise, insisting that an end to injustice will only come when the poorer population stop waiting for salvation from above and take social change into their own hands. The educational work of the church has had concrete results, as can be seen both in the social movements of the city and in the explosive rural land disputes, where the church's work of political conscientization has strengthened considerably the organization of the farmworkers.

The methodology, philosophy, and impact of popular education will be the subject of a future newsletter. I mention it here to give a sense of the educational dimension of the ideological debate I've described. But while the journalist in me is content to sit back and analyze the play of social visions, the ethical and political being that I am is chewing anxiously on a few remaining questions. I am wondering, for example, to what point the ideological definitions of the left blind it from understanding and responding effectively to the political moment in Brazil. Related questions follow: to what degree are modern businessmen like Cezar necessary for the development of Brazil's capacity to respond to social problems, and to what degree do they merely continue an ancient system of exploitation? Should the left seek dialogue with such business leaders, or should it maintain its stance that such dialogue is impossible? And given these determinations, what sort of education best responds to the short and long term needs of the workers of the country? These are questions that neither I nor Brazil have resolved.

Um abraço,



PT - Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker's Party)
 PDT - Partido Democrática Trabalhista (Democratic Labor Party)
 UDR - União Democrática Rural (Rural Democratic Union)
 FIESP - Federação de Industrias do Estado de São Paulo
 PNBE - Pensamento Nacional de Bases Empresariais
 CGT - Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores (General Confederation of Workers)
 PMDB - Partido de Movimento Democrático Brasileiro
 CUT - Central Única dos Trabalhadores
 CPV - Centro Pastoral Vergueiro (Vergueiro Pastoral Center)
 SENAI/SENAC - Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial/Comercial
 SESI/SESC - Serviço Social de Indústria/Comércio