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Utopian Transitions

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Dear Peter,

"Today's youth are very revolted with current-day politics. For these revolted youth, the vote isn't valid, since it won't change anything."
Antonio, age 16.

"Youth have different ideas and a more open mind. Unlike older people, we have a lot of hope. Youth will influence the elections in a positive way, showing that the country has hope, that the future is in our hands."
Cristina, age 17.

I doubt that Brazil has seen a presidential election in which the topic of youth has received so much attention. I am safe in saying that it hasn't happened for at least 29 years, the time that has passed since the country's last direct presidential elections. This year voters up to age 47 (70% of the electorate) could consider themselves young, since they had their first experience of voting for president. The most celebrated of these electoral novices were the 16 and 17-year olds who went to the polls for the first time in Brazilian history, inaugurating the lowered voting age instituted by the new constitution.

The political initiation of Brazilian teenagers sparked a heated marketing campaign to capture their six million potential new votes, as well as a debate as to whether these fresh-minded voters would or would not influence election results. But it was not easy to interest young people in their potential electoral influence. In the quotes above, taken from interviews with São Paulo high school students two month before the elections, one can catch a sense of their political oscillations. They waver between cynicism and euphoria, between "we are the future" and "who gives a damn?". Having spent their childhood under the dictatorship and their adolescence amidst a turbulent "transition to democracy", these youth view the election with a strong feeling of ambivalence. "Will it really change anything?" they ask, while dreaming in vague terms of a world "the way we want it".

Unlike the rest of the population, voters of age 16 and 17 were not obliged to vote. The constitution made their vote optional, along with that of those over 70. This made the voter registration campaign into a barometer of the interest of young voters in politics. In an attempt to stimulate registration, a group of students in Rio de Janeiro founded a group called Se Liga, 16 (more or less, "Tune in, 16"). The group spread to other cities,

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producing videos, posters and street activities promoting youth registration. "Don't come late to your date with democracy" urged enthusiastic teenagers in the clips aired by the major networks as public service messages. Although these appeals were as a rule apartisan, the political parties also entered the registration campaign, especially those of the left that thought they had the most to gain from the young vote. The PT (Worker's Party) produced T-shirts declaring "My first vote is for the PT", while São Paulo's socialist mayor, Luiza Erundina, promoted registration in person among the skate-boarding teenagers of the Parque Ibirapuera.

Despite this mobilization, the response of young voters was slow in coming. Eleven days before the close of voter registration, only one million voters of age 16 and 17 had registered, out of an estimated universe of six million. Most left their decision for the final week, and some were scared off by the huge lines of the last few days. On election day 3.3 million voters under 18 had registered, slightly over half of the projected number. They composed 2.7% of Brazil's 82 million voters. Numerically speaking, this gave 16 and 17-year olds little chance of altering the final results, especially since their votes were divided between candidates of diverse political tendencies. But this didn't keep the theme of youth from permeating the campaign, given the heavy demographic weight of the broader youthful population. In the 1980 census, 15 to 24-year olds made up 21% of the population, a percentage that has grown throughout the decade as youth and young adults turn into the biggest block on the demographic pyramid.

Like the voters, the presidential candidates were also surprisingly young. In a striking rejection of old-time politics and politicians, the two candidates (out of a field of 21) who won the first round of voting on November 15 were the two youngest with the possibility of winning: Fernando Collor de Melo of the PRN*, age 40, and Luis Ignacio (Lula) da Silva of the PT, age 44. Collor's handsome, fresh-faced manner aroused the passions of adolescent girls, while the bearded, plain-talking Lula fired up the enthusiasm of young activists. Five out of the ten front-runners were in their forties, and six belonged to political parties with less than a decade of existence. The greatest headache for 73-year old candidate Ulysses Guimarães of the PMDB was precisely his age; his old-man image, together with his alliances with unpopular President José Sarney, stuck more in the heads of voters than his leadership in the opposition to the dictatorship and his presidency of the constitutional congress. Ulysses became the symbol of old in the campaign, and if there was one thing Brazilian voters were convinced, it was that the old does not work.

The rejection of the old extended to the political parties that have controlled Brazilian politics during the decade of democratic transition. This election marked the political death of the big parties that inherited the old ARENA, party of the military government, and the MDB, the official opposition. In state elections three years ago the PMDB, formed of the old MDB, won 21 out of 26 state governorships and the largest number of seats in the constitutional congress. This year the tables were turned when Ulysses of the PMDB received only 4% of the vote. The PFL, a division of ARENA and the second largest party in congress, received less than 1%. The strongest emerging leaders belong to young parties, formed since political organization was legalized in 1980. Although they represent different ideological viewpoints, these new leaders all present themselves as opposition to Sarney and call for vigorous changes in national policy.

* A key to all of the symbols in this newsletter can be found at the end.

I was intrigued by how many different views on how to "save Brazil" came together under the heading of opposition. Just about all the colors of the ideological spectrum made it to the final dispute. Among the top ten one found candidates who defended "social-democracy", others who proposed "democratic socialism", those who defined themselves as "democratic liberals", as well as a strange new formulation, "liberal socialism", which I was surprised to hear described as a synonym for "modern capitalism". This scrambling of labels may mean that traditional ideological distinctions are breaking down, as the shakeup in the communist world would seem to confirm. Ideologically polarized candidates did not always offer widely different proposals; columnist Clovis Rossi of the Folha de São Paulo commented ironically, "when it comes to the hour of practical discussion, the discourses (of the candidates) approach each other . . . the Brazilian crisis is so acute that the responses end up seeming similar and approaching the orthodox."

But even if ideological divisions have lost their sharpness, they maintain a symbolic importance in the Brazilian political debate. During the two months before the election, prime-time television was invaded nightly by an hour of free programming divided between the 21 candidates, in which each had the chance to prove his difference from the pack. They sold their political messages with hi-tech marketing, complete with fancy graphics, jingles, denunciations, emotional appeals and footage of banner-waving crowds. Like in the United States, candidates walk a tightrope between political proposals and personal image-creation. But here they must also negotiate between radically different concepts of social change, which take on a symbolic life of their own, disconnected from pragmatic political considerations. The ideological opposition became particularly clear in the second round of the campaign, when Lula, the working class, socialist labor leader, confronted Collor, the wealthy, free market reformist, who used stiff anti-communist rhetoric to scare off poor and middle class voters from Lula's social justice discourse.

The relationship between proposals, image, and ideology becomes especially interesting when one considers the participation of youth in the elections. When the constitutional assembly approved lowering the voting age to 16, the political parties of the left celebrated the victory on the assumption that the younger vote is a vote for the opposition. An internal magazine of the PT described youth as "potential revolutionaries": "Youth is a sector that has not yet known the skepticism and disillusionment that has settled on the older generations. . . Eager for social and political participation, sensitive to appeals in favor of equality, justice and social transformation, youth constitute one of the fundamental bases of any prolonged work for a socialist revolution."

The reality as it has evolved in Brazil and elsewhere is not so simple. Youth have not shown an automatic rallying to the cause of socialism. In the case of Brazil, the current government is so discredited that every candidate declares himself to be "opposition". Which opposition will youth "naturally" support? Speaking historically, youth have shown themselves just as inclined, in certain times and societies, to support fascist and conservative movements as those considering themselves progressive or revolutionary. And to complicate things further, wasn't it youth we saw on television tearing down the Berlin wall?

These observations call to mind some essential questions. What does it mean to call youth the "renovators of society", as they have been labeled by candidates of diverse ideological tendencies in the scramble to attract the

young vote? What social, psychological, and economic factors help determine the susceptibility of youth to one or another of the ideological threads that are disputing hegemony within a given historical period? How do youth develop their symbols of utopia, and how do these symbols change over history?

From my conversations with and about Brazilian youth during these past few months, two basic thoughts have emerged as a foundation for any attempts at analysis. First, transformation means many things to many people, and what is more important for youth is the symbolic value of transformation, and not what that transformation would mean in concrete social and economic terms. In other words, image and ideology take precedence over proposals. Second, it is impossible to evaluate the potential "transformative force" of youth without a deep understanding of the cultural, political and economic climate in which they are growing toward adulthood.

In this newsletter I would like to examine the participation of Brazilian youth in the presidential elections. First, I will discuss statements of the kids themselves about the elections and Brazil's political situation, taken from newspaper surveys as well as debates I conducted in public high schools. Second, I will examine the utopian vision of the student movement of the 1960's and consider how youthful utopias have changed in the 1980's. Third, I will discuss the visions of several leading candidates as to why their messages attract the young vote. Interestingly, I discovered not only very differing views on Brazilian politics (which is to be expected), but also very different views on the meaning of the experience of being young.

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"The distrust is tangible, the perplexity. There is little ingenuousness, and a desire to change everything confronted with impotence." Elizabeth Lorenzotti, journalist, in an article about youth and politics.

When the coordinator of Se Liga, 16, 17-year old Manuela Pinho, was asked why she thought youth showed such hesitant interest in voter registration, she attributed it to the young people's "disbelief in the political class." Her statement was confirmed by a recent study in the Folha de São Paulo on the political culture of the Brazilian population. Youth of age 16 and 17 showed the highest rates of distrust of political institutions such as the judicial system, the presidency and the national congress.

But the study indicated an apparent contradiction in the notion of democracy held by the younger population. To a question designed to measure support for democracy, 40% of 16 and 17-year olds responded that it makes no difference if the government is a democracy or a dictatorship. Only 35% declared that democracy is always better and 19% said that sometimes dictatorship is better. The 40% "no difference" response was the highest among any age group, dropping to 27% among those from 18 to 25, 22% for 26 to 40, and 14% for those over 40.

But at the same time as they expressed skepticism about democracy, the overwhelming majority of young people expressed their agreement with the statement, "If the people had the power to decide, the country would be much better." 86% of the 16 to 17-year olds approved the statement, a percentage which decreased linearly with the increase in age. Only 7% of the younger group disagreed. They also expressed the clearest opposition to authoritarian measures such as prohibition of strikes, intervention in unions and censure of the media, as well as support for the belief that increased participation is

preferable to "a strong leader who puts things in place." Evidently it is not the idea of participation that makes these youth skeptical of democracy, but rather their experience within a democratic system seen as corrupt, incompetent, and protective of elites.

The apparent contradiction in the heads of young people raises some troubling questions about their future political leanings. As the commentator of the Folha wrote, "One possible conclusion is that these youth don't identify democracy with participation and dictatorship with lack of participation. The same 'distrustful' youth want or think it good that 'the people have power'. The idea that democracy, even with flaws, is the most open system for this has not yet turned a crystalline conclusion for them. If one wants to speculate, one could say that their participative impulse could run the risk of being channeled by non-democratic options, although there is no evidence that this will actually occur."

For the present, the desire for participation coupled with distrust of democracy seems to be resulting not in "not-democratic options", but rather in a sort of paralysis. A recurring theme among youth is that of their impotence to change anything. According to the Folha, those under 25 years expressed the highest percentage of disbelief in their own ability to influence politics. I noted this feeling in my visits to high schools in São Paulo. "Why should we be interested if no one will listen to us?" they asked at the end of debates in which we had talked about everything they saw as wrong with politics and their lives, and then reached the question of what they could do about it. "Alone, we can't do anything." Well then, why don't you get together with others? "Because no one else is interested," they declare, working themselves into a circle that smothers the impulse for action.

Not all of Brazil's youth suffer from such political paralysis. The study in the Folha also notes an expressive presence of youth in non-institutionalized activities for intervention in public life, such as signing petitions, attending meetings of neighborhood associations and taking part in street demonstrations. I can confirm the strong participation of youth from my own experience with social movements. But such activities only succeed in attracting those relatively few youth whose impulse for action is strong enough to overcome the culture of paralysis that predominates in the schools and workplaces. "Young people don't feel much hope for Brazil," wrote one 17-year old on a somber note. "Therefore they don't feel much interest in elections." But again, lack of faith in elections does not indicate a lack of a desire for change; as a 15-year old girl wrote, "I think that youth are not satisfied with the candidates for president. I think that this election will be a catastrophe. Youth want a better Brazil."

In the debates I conducted in public high schools, I tried to find out what working class kids think about the lowering of the voting age to 16. The three schools I visited were located in the Zona Leste of São Paulo, the poorer, heavily populated Eastern region. Most of the kids I spoke with were night students, meaning that they work full-time and study at night in precarious educational conditions. In this survey I was interested less in their political opinions (which two months before the elections were vague and undefined) but rather in their views of youth. Their evaluation of the voting age was really a self-evaluation of their own political capabilities.

The responses I received confirmed the ambivalence I described earlier. Of the 200 students I surveyed between the ages of 14 and 25, slightly over 50% agreed with the lowering of the voting age to 16, which means that nearly

50% disagreed. Those under 18 had a higher approval rate (70%) while those over 18 were less supportive (36%). Their reasons for approval or disapproval varied widely, offering an interesting spectrum of attitudes on the political role of youth.

1. EUPHORIA: youth as tomorrow's future

About 14% of those approving the new voting age responded with a strong euphoric valorization of youth. They expressed optimism about the potential influence of youth in the elections and hoped that "youth will make a better Brazil." They were not very specific about how the choices of youth would differ from those of adults, tending to stick to a vague notion of "innovation". They valued the new, but did not say what that new should be, expressing sympathy for candidates of both the left and right:

Starting in the 90's, Brazil will change for the better, and youth will have an enormous influence in this happening. (Male, 19)

Youth of 16 need a chance to change the country, since the adults haven't done it. As they always say, youth are tomorrow's future, and for this we should begin early to be interested in our country. (Female, 19)

I believe that the ideology of youth is different from that of adults. A different candidate could be elected, and we need innovation. (F 20)

2. MATURITY: youth as responsible citizens

A second, larger group of youth (34%) responded by affirming that teenagers of age 16 already have their cabeças feitas ("heads made") to take responsible roles in society. These kids emphasized the fact that most 16-year olds work, carry considerable responsibility, and therefore have a right to participate in the decisions that affect their future. Their view of youth was less romanticized and more practical, and they insisted on their right to express themselves:

I think a person of age 16 already has his head made up to vote. Many illiterates vote, why not an adolescent who studies? (M 17)

Many youth of age 16 are much more informed than others a little older. Since the vote is not obligatory, they will vote because they really want to take it seriously and to help the country. Youth today possess the capacity to have a political vision of their country. (F 15)

Youth of this age already participate in the workforce. They have a certain experience of life, such as a concern with salaries, inflation, and for this they will think well before voting. Youth already have obligations, they should have rights as well. (F 18)

Some saw the vote as part of an educational process, helping youth to become more responsible and take a greater interest in politics:

If someone doesn't have responsibility when he is young, than he will never have it. People don't think youth have capacity to vote, but they never gave us the chance. Only now can we prove we are capable. (M 19)

I think this will provide incentives for youth, giving them more self-esteem. Youth need motivation to feel at least a little useful. (F 16)

3. EDUCATION: youth as unprepared students

Both those who approved and disapproved the lower voting age complained frequently of feeling unprepared to vote. Many of those who thought youth deserve the right to choose their government protested over the lack of discussion in the schools to help them "choose right", as they said rather categorically. Others used their faulty preparation as justification for leaving the voting age at 18. About 12% blamed the weak educational system for their feeling of unpreparedness:

I don't think youth of 16 have enough maturity to choose a person to govern a country like Brazil. Education in Brazil is very poor, for this reason there are only a few youth prepared to vote. (M 19)

The great majority is not intellectually prepared. They lack information and discernment of the real and the utopic. Everything is put very superficially for youth, without deepening their ideal. (M 20)

Yes, I think I am capable, but I don't think youth are well prepared, maybe because the world illudes them greatly. Television, music and other factors veil the eyes of youth. (F 21)

4. IRRESPONSIBILITY: youth as unthinking adolescents

Although the students above blamed their education for not preparing them, more tended to put the blame on the period of adolescence itself. About 31% asserted that youth should not vote because they are irresponsible and unscrupulous. This blanket designation of youth as irresponsible seemed as much a categorical dismissal as the euphoric descriptions of youth described earlier. Neither attitude grounds its opinions in historical (and thus changeable) social conditions, but rather in static definitions:

I think that the vote at 16 is a political coup, since the great majority of youth are irresponsible. They are more concerned with enjoying life than in thinking of the economic factors of the country. (F 17)

In this country there exist many adolescents who don't care anything about anything and don't have the capacity to put someone in power who will change everything. (F 17)

It is an age that provokes changes in people, and therefore many don't have responsibility. Youth don't care who will govern the country, they want to know how the president will help them in their crises. (F 18)

Many worried that youthful voters would not take the election seriously, seeing it a game rather than a conscious decision. Others worried about the potential manipulation of young voters:

Many youth of 16 will vote not thinking of bettering Brazil, but to say "I VOTED". They will vote only as a game, because its something new, and they want to see what it's like to vote for the first time. (F 15)

The vote at 16 was a way for the government to get votes, since they know that youth are easily influenced. They will vote immaturly, giving away votes for free, although that's the government's intention. (M 25)

5. DISILLUSIONMENT: youth as revolted observers

A certain portion of students blamed not adolescence or education for the disinterest of young people in politics, but rather the political system itself. About 9% expressed strong feelings of revolt and disillusionment with politics and politicians, often using this to justify not voting. Even among those who strongly supported the lowered voting age, the sweeping majority expressed dissatisfaction with the choice of candidates. One hears a tone of superiority in these youth, much different from those who thought the problem was the irresponsibility of teenagers. Rather than thinking themselves unworthy of the elections, they consider the candidates unworthy of them:

I think youth are prepared to vote. There are just no candidates worthy of those precious votes. (F 18)

The politicians promise to do this and that, but once in power they only look for things in their own interest. They want to get rich at our cost. I don't think they will improve the situation of youth. (M 18)

I don't interest myself in politics. Principally, Brazilian politicking. Therefore I have no formed opinion. I intend to annul my vote. (M 21)

* * *

While utopic feeling has not disappeared among youth, the interviews confirm that it is mixed with a strong dose of skepticism. Although some young people confidently defend their right to participate in politics, more tend to question their own capacities and doubt the possibility of change. The kids want change, but have little vision of what forms it might take. They lack the symbols that twenty years earlier filled the streets and university campuses with student demonstrators, protesting against the dictatorship and calling for "the revolution". It is interesting to look back at the student movement during the 1960's in order to understand how the self-perception and political participation of youth has changed in the 1980's.

The participation of students in Brazilian political life has a long history. In the book Youth Power, written in 1968, the young journalist Artur José Poerner traces the development of the student movement since the early days of the colony and empire. Young middle class idealists took part in the aborted independence movement of 1788, in the abolitionist and republican campaigns of the late 1800's, and in other assorted agitations and movements throughout the early years of the Republic. In 1937 the movement was centralized with the formation of UNE (National Union of Students). UNE had an important role in the anti-fascist campaign that led to Brazil's participation in World War II, as well as the nationalistic battles of the 1940's and 50's, when Brazil's petroleum production was declared a state monopoly. During the late 50's the student movement became increasingly radicalized under the influence of the highly political Catholic Action movement, which in the first impulse of liberation theology was beginning to express its militant option for the poor.

The spirit of protest of the middle class students of the 1960's was nourished by economic and political conditions that provided them with clearly defined enemies. Under the recessive economic policy of the dictatorship middle income families were undergoing a painful process of belt-tightening, which financially dependent students felt in the skin. The government was pursuing an educational policy of privatizing education, leading to the declining quality of the public universities where most middle class students studied. And the intellectual climate of the time was permeated by a

superficial Marxism that gave students a way to understand their current-day difficulties in sweeping historical terms.

In addition, under the dictatorship the students had an unquestioningly brutal opponent, and that helps in breaking down political ambivalence. Knowing the potential disruptive force of student agitation, the military regime abolished UNE soon after taking power in 1964, invading and burning down the seat of the organization in Rio de Janeiro. This had the perverse effect of intensifying the mobilization of the students, who continued to hold yearly clandestine congresses until the military crackdown of 1968. University students were joined in growing numbers by younger high school students, animated by their new-found sense of purpose. They saw themselves as the vanguard of a political, social, and cultural transformation in Brazil, which started with the call for university reform, rooted itself in resistance to the dictatorship, and extended its goals toward the mobilization of labor and popular movements and the rejection of Yankee imperialism. Students were jailed, beaten, and tortured, but this seemed to increase their fervor.

In March of 1968 an 18-year old student named Edson Luis was killed in a shoot-out in a school restaurant. The widespread indignation at his death helped to break down the isolation between the student movement and the rest of the population, bringing tens of thousands of middle class and middle aged people to the streets of Rio and other cities in the "March of 100 Thousand". These demonstrations created a euphoric climate that convinced many that the country was undergoing a period of democratization, an impression reinforced by such international events as Prague Spring, the student uprisings in France and the U.S. anti-Vietnam protests.

But as in Czechoslovakia, the euphoria was short-lived. On August 28 military police and army shock troops invaded the University of Brasilia, destroying classrooms and beating students and professors, with the justification that the university was harboring "subversives". In October the police disrupted the 30th Congress of UNE, imprisoning the principal student leaders of the period. In December the government issued the infamous "Institutional Act Number 5", suspending all civil and political rights, closing the National Congress, purging "subversive" legislators, and transferring legislative functions to the executive power. Intellectuals, journalists and politicians who had continued criticizing the dictatorship were hunted and silenced, and the student movement was effectively dissolved. Those student leaders who remained free went increasingly in the direction of armed struggle, joining the clandestine urban guerrilla groups that composed the only active political agitation during the first part of the 1970's, until they too were nearly wiped out by persistent police persecution.

What impresses me on reading commentaries by ex-participants is the utopic nostalgia that floods through their descriptions. They use such phrases as the "dream generation", the "delirium of the imagination of the left", the "renaissance of revolutionary passion" and the "utopia of a new world". José Genoio, an ex-guerrilla who is now a respected congressman from the PT, said in a recent interview:

We were a very daring generation. The youth of '68 can be criticized for many errors, minus that of omission. It was a politicized generation, which accepted the challenge of braving a new world. Clearly, we did not elaborate a theory adequate for the revolution. But we had a positive posture, a very open mind. Including on ethical and moral values, not just political values.

As Genoio indicated, the student movement of '68 also introduced new sexual values to Brazilian life, helping to challenge the subordinate position of women and the extra-marital tabus of the period. When the government wanted to arouse anti-student feeling, it exhibited not books on Marx, but condoms and birth control pills picked up in raids on student centers. The sexual revolution was seen as part of the larger political transformation that seemed to be shaking the world, as Poerner describes in Youth Power:

Such precocity, characteristic of the phase of transition that the world undergoes on the way to a more advanced society, is the most visible sign that Brazil will change, like other countries in Latin America. (These countries) have the common denominator, in addition to exploitation and backwardness, of a population with a young majority and an increasingly active political participation of youth.

Poerner's enthusiastic description of the political possibilities of youth was analysed more critically 20 years later by José Dirceu, one of the student leaders arrested in the police sweep on the 1968 congress of UNE. Dirceu was among the prisoners released the following year after the kidnapping of the U.S. ambassador. He is now a state legislator in São Paulo and the secretary-general of the PT. As he said in an interview:

1968 had the symbolism of students fighting against repression, of the world revolution of youth. But this was a bit of a mystification, it lost its real historical dimension. The social force of the students was relative. We felt the solitude of not having at our side those that should be the real directors of the revolutionary process - the workers. Our idea (the union of students with workers) was correct, but we jumped ahead of the game when we raised the question of armed struggle, of the immediate taking of power.

In Dirceu's description we see the tension between the symbols of change and the real possibility of change. In their ideological fervor the students over-estimated the revolutionary potential of the Brazilian political climate, and the "world revolution of youth" was crushed by the tanks and the secret police. As sociologist Antonio Houaiss wrote in his introduction to Poerner's book, "a principle problem within the student movement can be called the precipitation of taking of consciousness, with the crystallization of conclusions eventually radicalized beyond present historical possibilities."

If the theories of the student movement outstripped the realism of its proposals, even theories took a secondary role amidst the euphoria of "revolutionary" action. Ex-student leader Marijane Viero Lisboa describes how the images of heroes often took precedence over ideology:

We acted first, and afterwards looked for theoretical justification for our actions. This was why our theoretical ideas were so synthetic, inconsistent, and frequently contradictory. Marx, "Che" Guevara, Debray, Lenin, Trotsky and Mao Tse Tung were our gods, and their role as revolutionary heroes was more important than their theories . . . We believed in revolutionary will as the sufficient determiner of victory.

For the students of 1968 the symbol of personal and social freedom was "the revolution", an identification made easier by the visible enemy of the repressive regime. It was clear to these students that the institutionalized democratic option was not a solution, that the official "opposition" was no more than a means of government control, that the world was undergoing a revolutionary convulsion and that they had the power to be part of it. Their rejection of democratic institutions previews that of the students of 1989,

except that somewhere in twenty years of change the emerging generation lost the sense of its own transformative force. "Revolutionary will" gave way to political paralysis.

How did this change come about? The process can be summed up in the phrases: "workers work, students study, and the government governs." This was the official line imposed on the the educational system throughout the late 60's and 70's. Independent student organizations, called grêmios livres , were substituted by the domesticated "civic centers", whose sole duty consisted in organizing parties, sports competitions, and other state celebrations. A course called "Moral and Civic Education" was made obligatory for students of all ages. Questioning students were hushed by frightened teachers and stern principals. Geography was separated from history, and humanities gave way to technical classes that would supposedly prepare students directly for the workforce. The official media cultivated the idea that politics was something dirty and corrupt, distant from real life and certainly something respectable people should avoid.

It is no wonder that the children of the dictatorship arrive at the end of the 80's in a state of political perplexity. Not too long ago they weren't allowed to ask questions in class. All at once 16-year olds are urged on television to "take part in democracy". For teenagers, the elections don't bring the same sense of relief as for their elders, who celebrate "breaking a fast of 29 years". How can you break a fast if you have never eaten?

Instead of the polarized clarities of the 1960's, these adolescents receive mixed messages from all directions. The newer democratic discourse appears side by side with the vestiges of authoritarianism. In 1986 São Paulo teenagers heard the newly elected governor of the PMDB, supposedly the "opposition" party, promise to govern "with the people". A year later they saw him call in the cavalry to break up a demonstration of striking teachers. They are told that the new constitution guarantees them the right to organize grêmios livres in their schools. But then they see students who try to exercise this right punished or expelled, and the teachers who support them fired. They watch on television and read in magazines (not to mention, learn on the streets) about expanded sexual freedom and equality of sex roles. But teenage girls are still locked in their homes to preserve their purity, while boys are urged on with a wink. They watch reports heralding the legal reforms in the new constitution, followed by news of yet another corruption scandal. Given the contradictions they see in the political structures that surround them, can we think it strange when they doubt whether democracy is any different from dictatorship?

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If the ambivalence of 80's teenagers is due in part to the absence of the symbols of freedom that mobilized their predecessors, then it became the job of the presidential candidates to supply those symbols. In the two weeks before the first round of voting on November 15 I visited various campaign committees to discuss why each candidate considered his message attractive to youth. Several candidates emerged in the polls as having an especially strong showing among younger voters. Among them were Fernando Collor de Melo of the PRN, Guillerme Afif Domingos of the PL, Lula of the PT, Mario Covas of the PSDB, and Roberto Freire of the PCB. Considering that among these five one finds such diverse ideological self-definitions as socialist, communist, social-democrat, liberal and center, one can see the choices of youth cannot be determined along left/right lines. Four of the five candidates are in their forties, showing the tendency to favor younger, more dynamic candidates, with fewer ties to current government.

Two other candidates also had fairly good showing among youth: Leonel Brizola of the PDT, age 67, and Paulo Maluf of the PDS, age 58. I decided not to visit their campaigns because both are old-timers on the Brazilian political scene. Their appeal was based less in ideology than in old populist electoral traditions. Brizola represents the figure of the caudilho, the political chief vowing in grandiose terms to end the misery of his people. A supporter of deposed president João Goulart, he spent the dictatorship in exile and returned to get himself elected governor of Rio, keeping a determined eye on the presidency. He was narrowly defeated by Lula for the second place position in the first round of the elections. Maluf is the symbol of cynical efficiency; a popular description has it that "he robs, but gets things done". Appointed mayor and then governor of São Paulo by the dictatorship, he was defeated in a surprise upset by Luiza Erundina of the PT in last year's mayoral elections. Both Brizola and Maluf are highly picturesque figures in Brazilian political history, but their appeal lies less in the ideas they add to the changing political debate than in their personal ability to whip up the loyalty of long-time supporters.

The other five candidates can be considered the real front-liners in the ideological battle of the campaign. It was they that debated the most pressing questions for Brazil's future: the role of the state, the external debt, land reform, environment, distribution of wealth, modernization of the economy, improvement of social services. Each candidate had a specific appeal to youth because he offered a certain utopic vision, expressed as much through personal style as through ideas and proposals. I will take the five candidates one by one to examine their visions of youth and the symbols of freedom they came to represent within Brazilian society.

1. Roberto Freire - revolutionary passion

Roberto Freire made it almost okay to be communist again. Although the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) has been around since 1922, it spent most of its history in illegality, except for a short period around 1945. During the 1960's the PCB was abandoned by the more active left, especially by the student movement, because of its timid strategy of keeping quiet until things got better. In 1962 a dissident group split from the party, forming the PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil), in an attempt to maintain the highly centralized, Stalinist version of Marxism-Leninism. The formation of the PT (Worker's Party) in 1980 was a reaction against both communist parties and an attempt to form a democratic socialist party with a wide, organic base in the popular and labor movements, something neither of the PC's, as parties of intellectuals, could boast.

In 1985 the PCB and the PCdoB were finally legalized, after decades of persecution and clandestine politics within other parties. After narrowly losing a 1972 mayoral election in Olinda as candidate of the MDB, Roberto Freire was elected state and federal representative, and finally delegate of the PCB to the constitutional congress in 1986. He won respect for his intelligent participation in the constitutional process, notably for his skill at making alliances among the various progressive forces. He is young (47), sincere, articulate, and strikingly handsome, according to most female evaluations. He talks of "renovated" socialism and identifies himself with Gorbachev in his insistence on the importance of freedom and democracy within a "just and fraternal" society. He gave impressive performances during televised debates, demonstrating a deep comprehension of the complexities of government and maintaining a dignified, rational stance when others began throwing mud. His appeal for development with social justice attracts middle class intellectuals. But despite the good impression, he never made it past 2% in the polls. It became common to hear, "Freire's the best candidate. Too bad he's a communist."

I was recently surprised, on visiting a small industrial town in the interior of Minas Gerais, to find that Freire had come in first place in a mock election at a local high school, defeating national front-runner Collor de Melo. As I talked with local teenagers I gathered that he impressed them with his intelligence, his conviction, and his courage to declare himself a communist. Not that the kids understood what "communism" means; most had been efficiently sheltered from such ideological discussion. But they knew that communists had been persecuted in the past and respected his refusal to back down on what he believed. As one boy told me, "Freire has an ideal, he wants a different type of society, with more justice." Freire himself used dramatic language in his campaign program, identifying his candidacy with "reason, passion, and utopia".

When I visited the campaign committee of the PCB in São Paulo, I was introduced to Patricia, a young woman who is trying to reorganize the nearly defunct Communist Youth. Daughter of long-time PCB activists and of Japanese descent, she had recently returned from several years of study in the Soviet Union. She criticized the old organization of the JC (Juventude Comunista) for having as its sole intention the formation of new party leaders. "Now we see youth as part of the larger picture, as part of the renovation of the party and of society. We identify with the youth of Eastern Europe, China, the Soviet Union, who are trying to bring democracy to socialism. Youth are re-evaluating the errors of Stalinism. They have a natural desire for more freedom, more international exchange, more creativity and participation."

The vision of youth described by Patricia echoes Roberto Freire's bold language. "Youth are radical by nature. They have a need to make history, to transform society, to express their revolutionary passion. I think that's why American youth are turning to drugs, because their lives don't have meaning. In Brazil, the generation born under the dictatorship is a lost generation. Everything was directed - their education, their entertainment, their music, their politics. Most don't believe in elections. They turn nihilistic. But nihilism is also part of the radicalism of youth."

2. Mario Covas - rational idealism

It was the social-democratic party of Mario Covas that introduced the constitutional text lowering the voting age to 16. "Young people already produce, why shouldn't they vote?" I was asked, or rather told, by Alexandre, an earnest 16-year old in the campaign headquarters of the PSDB (Brazilian Party of Social-Democracy). "Youth aren't apathetic," continued his friend Maria Alice, a 26-year old woman who serves as youth coordinator for the PSDB of São Paulo. "Those uninterested in politics are the economically marginalized. They don't have perspectives. Mario Covas offers perspectives."

I was sitting at a table with five or six young people between the ages of 15 and 26. All were upper middle class, educated and articulate, with a tendency toward the intellectual. They were trying to explain to me what social-democracy means and why it attracts youth. "The PSDB is not specifically directed toward youth, but the complexity of the program attracts the more thinking youth." They described the "excellent acceptance" of social-democracy in Europe and said that it's not socialism - "none of that". As the younger kids groped, Maria Alice took the lead: "Social-democracy favors the majority. It provides social justice and distribution of income. It tries to give incentive to capitalism, while maintaining the role of the state as a humanizing force."

The kids made it clear to me that they weren't campaigning simply to elect Mario Covas, but because of the wider social vision of the party. "In

the PSDB, its not the man that counts, but the message. The vote for Covas is an ideological vote. Those who vote for Covas know why they are voting for Covas." They affirmed that the 300 registered youth militants in São Paulo are almost all from classes A and B (the two highest financial brackets). "But it is these classes that make politics in this country," they justified. "Poor youth are excluded from politics. They aren't attracted to any party."

The PSDB is a young party, formed last year by a group of dissidents from the PMDB. Senator Mario Covas had been the leader of the PMDB in the constitutional congress, but when the party began making alliances with more conservative sectors, Covas led the movement by the progressive wing to form a new party. They took with them some of the most important intellectuals in the country, such as sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso and economist Helio Jaquaribe. As a party of intellectuals, the PSDB takes its ideological stance very seriously, as can be guessed by the dialogue of its youthful militants.

The party also takes seriously the education of these young members. The kids described proudly the youth rallies they had organized in every state, although they assured me that youth in the PSDB do not serve just to pass out pamphlets. The party organized a series of seminars on "Youth and Modernity", with the objective of training these adolescents as future leaders. Topics included the meaning of social-democracy, the environment, education and technology, culture and government. The kids agreed on the value of the seminars. "They're good, because they help us to understand the complexity of things. We have to be idealistic, but an idealism grounded in reality."

Pedro, a member of the state youth council of the party, told me that in all the schools he had visited, students were "enchanted" with the PSDB. "Covas is winning in all of the mock elections. He is especially popular among kids of classes A and B, but I also went to a school of class E where kids were very receptive." Pedro admitted that among poorer students, it was the man that counted more than the ideology. Covas was well-remembered for his stint as mayor in the early 1980's, when he implanted various social programs. He is seen as serious, honest, "stainless" - a kind of fallback amidst so much corruption. Among skeptical youth, he is a sort of last hope; "if Covas doesn't work out, then Brazil is really sunk."

Choosing Covas was very different from the heady risk of voting for Freire, although both expressed a similar social justice utopia. Covas was seen as a "safe" candidate, an image he reinforced by fence-sitting through much of the controversial debate about the role of the state in the economy. He was criticized for failing to take a clear position on such issues as privatizing state industries, in an attempt to maintain the good graces of both business people and progressive intellectuals. But even such cautiousness has a certain attraction for some youth. In the view of the PSDB, youth don't want radical solutions or revolutionary discourse. They want leaders with integrity, rationality, and well-balanced proposals in order to re-establish perspectives for Brazil.

3. Lula - the spirit of protest

The PT (Worker's Party) has by far the strongest participation of youth in its militancy. Youth between 15 and 25 make up the bulk of the party's rank and file. In an attempt to make internal political discussion more democratic, the party is organized into local nuclei in which everyone's voice can be theoretically heard. This makes being a "petista" a heady experience of political education, through a constant process of discussion, proposals, and organization of activities ranging from seminars to street demonstrations. Being a militante comes close to being a full-time profession, although many youth juggle work and study along with it. Unlike the PSDB, which believes

youth must think now in order to act later, the PT believes that youth should act now and try to pick up some thought along the way.

What makes the PT different in tone from the PCB and PSDB is the strong theme of protest that runs through all of its statements and activities. It taps into the spirit of revolt and alienation felt by students and tries to channel this into political activities. One can hear this tone in the special youth bulletin produced for Lula's campaign:

This can't go on! . . . We can smell from afar the rottenness of capitalist society. Even if they say on television that the next government will work out, we know that in the dark corners of the city, blacks are arrested for being black, youth for being young . . . Who wants nuclear war, ecological devastation, hunger, epidemics, poverty? Why this hell if "everything could be so different"? Who said there had to be rich and poor? . . .

We feed the fertile soil of history with dreams and revolution. Strange kisses of protest and inconformity . . . Let's organize our band of millions and make the good life, the world as we want it, the nights free, the days light, plenty for all and poverty only in dictionaries, racism, sexism, and all that divides, oppresses, represses, make all of this an old page in the trash can of history.

The kids of the PSDB criticized the PT because of its "radical discourse". Those of the PCB objected to its "spontaneous" approach, a standard criticism on the left for emotional activism unbased in theoretical considerations. On the other hand, the PCB admits that it doesn't have nearly the support among poor and working class youth that the PT has. Youth of the PCB tend to be intellectual and well-educated, the self-appointed vanguard of the middle class. The PT has these types too, but it also has a lively participation of youth from lower economic and educational background, many of them introduced to politics in the church base communities. The PT's attempt to construct a widely-based socialist party with a democratic structure is not without difficulties; the consequence of pluralism has been the division of the party into numerous "tendencies" disputing internal hegemony. But due to its grass-roots base and the single-minded dedication of its militants, the PT has achieved a dynamism hard to find in Brazilian party politics.

Within the socialist class ethic of the PT, the candidacy of Lula has strong symbolic value. Lula was a skilled metal worker in São Paulo, having migrated from Northeast Brazil like hundreds of thousands of poverty-stricken Northeasterners. He lost his pinky finger in a factory accident, due in most part to the inefficiency of public medical assistance. He began to participate in the labor movement, was elected president of the metal-working union of São Bernardo (an industrial city outside of São Paulo), and in 1978-79 led a series of massive, hard-fought strikes that marked the weakening of the dictatorship and opened a new stage of Brazilian labor history. He helped to found the PT in 1980, running as its candidate for governor in 1982. Although he has no university education, in 1986 he was elected constitutional delegate with the highest number of votes in Brazil.

Lula has the symbolic distinction of being the first factory worker to dispute, and come very close to winning, the presidency of Brazil. At times he ran into difficulty trying to balance the ideological demands of his two roles: hard-talking opposition leader and potential statesman. He wavered back and forth between a tough anti-capitalist discourse and a more moderate tone that appeared almost social-democratic. But he still embodied Brazilian class divisions in a dramatic way. For the middle class, voting for Lula meant overcoming their fear of agitators and distrust of the less educated.

For the working class it meant overcoming the negative self-image that says workers aren't fit to run governments. For youth of any class he offered a strong and untested symbol of radical social change, and a way to protest against everything out there that's wrong. Although the PT has a well-developed platform written by a distinguished team of intellectuals, most young militants are attracted more by the opportunity for action than by a deep consideration of proposals. They pick up a sketchy socialist ideology that soon becomes a question of faith.

4. Afif Domingos - the entrepreneurial dream

Afif Domingos was the best representative of the neo-liberalism that is sweeping through Latin American politics. He was candidate of the recently formed Liberal Party (PL), which proposes to develop an ideologically coherent defense of free market capitalism, to counter-act the ideological dynamism of the PT on the left. The liberals insist that they fit into no pre-determined political camp. "The Brazilian people don't want to go to the left or right," Afif declared in his campaign program. "They want to go forward."

To find out about liberal thinking I went to the office of the leadership of the PL in the state Legislative Assembly. The office had been transformed into a campaign committee, and as I entered I was handed a sticker and a keychain stamped "Afif Presidente". I spoke with a legislative aide, Dr. Abílio Borin, and several advisors who happened to be in the office. When I asked why youth are attracted to Afif, Dr. Borin said, "because he offers a young message, a message of hope." When I asked him to define "hope", he said that Afif's principal appeal was his defense of micro-businesses (i.e. small entrepreneurial ventures, family businesses, autonomous workshops, etc.) as a federal representative and delegate to the Constitutional Assembly.

The vision of youth described by Dr. Borin presents a strong contrast to the protest ethic of the PT. "Every young person desires anxiously to run his own business. Youth are anxious for freedom, for openness to the world. They don't want to be against things, they want to be in favor. They don't want to revolt, they want to construct. They don't want the old slogans of the "rebel army"; they want proposals, patriotism, hope for Brazil. The appeal of Afif is that he isn't against anything. He is in favor of a modernization of economic and social conditions in Brazil."

According to this view, youth are becoming disillusioned with the classical left. "In the past, being on the left gave a kind of status. Now it no longer gives the same status." Student radicals were "waking up", discovering their errors, and turning into liberals. Dr. Borin affirmed that within the universities there exists a "latent liberalism", meaning that the great majority of students identify with the free market ideology, even though the left is more visible in the organized student movement. The growing support for Afif proved, he asserted, that the dream of having one's own business is the strongest economic aspiration of youth, rather than outdated, state-controlled socialist utopias.

Dr. Borin attributed the strong disillusionment among youth to the difficult economic conditions. "Children have a natural tendency to be liberals. Ask any 10 or 12-year old what he wants, and he'll say he wants his own business. It's when they hit the job market that they become revolted. With low salaries, scarce jobs, and lack of professional training, of course they feel frustrated. This tends to push youth to the left. Our proposal is to change the current vertical structure of the economy to a horizontal one, opening space for micro-businesses using advanced technology. In this way you offer perspectives to youth who are currently feeling revolted with their exclusion from the economy."

The advisors denied that it was primarily children of wealthy families who were attracted to Afif's message. "It's the poorer youth that have the strongest desire to open their own enterprises - they sell oranges, drive taxis, anything to be independent. Once they have the experience of working for themselves, they will never again be satisfied with a salary. This message appeals to youth of all classes."

Despite this discourse, Afif did not manage to establish roots among the lower classes. Although he surged in the polls when he first went on television, most working class youth soon became wary of the seductive, fatherly image he projected, seeing it as a disguised defense of the rich. Although he had strong support among the upper classes, he lacked the youthful charisma of Collor de Melo, who with a similar free market discourse was able to break down the division between rich and poor. Because of Afif's failure to capture the masses, the business community was slow to support him, since its interest was pragmatic rather than ideological. The economic establishment needed to keep the left (principally Lula or Brizola) from gaining power, and for this it needed a more charismatic candidate.

5. Collor de Melo - the spirit of renovation

We come finally to the candidate who carried the day, in a close run-off with Lula on December 17. Fernando Collor de Melo, Brazil's next president, became the symbol of euphoric youth during the campaign. It is rare that his young supporters give economic or ideological reasons for supporting him. As I was told by a 20-year old political aide in Collor's São Paulo headquarters, "Collor represents something new, the force of renovation. He is the only one who will change the situation." When I tried to push him on what those changes might be, he turned vague and personal. "Collor has conviction, he believes in something. This gives us more strength." But I could not get him to explain to me what it is Collor believes in.

Collor consciously cultivated the theme of youth during the campaign. With his boyish good looks and his sporty manner, he seemed to embody força joven (young force) in a country tired of politicking old men. Aides told me the story of one occasion in São Paulo when rush hour traffic made it seemingly impossible to make it to a campaign rally on time. Undaunted, Collor grabbed a motorcycle and zipped on over, leaving his astonished aides behind. He has surrounded himself with youthful advisors. Most fall in the age range of 30 to 45, like Egberto Baptista, the director of the São Paulo campaign committee, with whom I spoke about Collor's appeal to youth. Collor's principal message, Baptista told me, was "Don't leave Brazil!" In the past few years over 200,000 young people have left Brazil for the United States, Portugal, Europe, and thousands more dream of leaving. "Collor wants youth to believe in Brazil again. They should be able to find in Brazil the economic opportunities they seek in other countries."

Baptista admitted that it was Collor's spirit that attracted youth more than his proposals. "Collor is not domesticated, unlike other politicians. He is not tied to political parties, politicians, or associations. He represents the strongest opposition to Sarney in the campaign." A year ago Collor was a little known governor from the small Northeastern state of Alagoas. He began to gain press attention for his highly visible (some say, demagogic) fight against the corruption of exorbitantly paid public functionaries in his state. Although he has political origins within ARENA, the party of the military government, and later with the PMDB, he started his own party to run for president, the PRN (Party of National Reconstruction). During the campaign he presented himself as a young David confronting the powerful Goliaths of Brazilian corruption and inefficiency. But despite his carefully cultivated image of isolation, he had his own powerful allies,

notably Roberto Marinho, owner of Brazil's foremost television network, the Globo. Marinho decided early on that Collor would be the only chance of defeating the left in the election, since he was the only candidate capable of maintaining a clear oppositional stance from the center-right. The Globo began promoting Collor back in April, when Collor exploded in the polls, leaping up in a week's time from virtually nothing to over 40%.

According to Baptista, youth are changing in their styles of political opposition. "In the past, university students have tended to be more to the left. This was part of the ethic of protest during the dictatorship. Few learned to protest by way of the center or right." He believed that the left's monopoly of protest was changing. "Today 15 and 16-year olds are protesting in favor of capitalism. They are more westernized, they want foreign goods - Reboks, study courses abroad, foreign currency. Even poorer youth want to go to other countries because they want free lives. They don't want socialism; they want capitalism, free initiative."

In São Paulo two very different groups of youth supported Collor. The first, called the Brazilian Youth Movement (MJB), consisted of upper class kids, children of wealthy business-people who in previous elections had supported such conservative candidates as Paulo Maluf and Jânio Quadros. The second group, called the Youth Movement for Fernando Collor (MJFC), was composed of students much lower on the economic scale. They worked mostly in banks, offices, and other low paying service jobs, and their goal was to move up in life. As Afif's aide had said, they wanted their own business, more economic freedom, and a chance to be included in the economy. They supported Collor because with his youthful demeanor and personal dynamism, he embodied their hope for economic opportunity. If Lula symbolized class division and the capacity of the workers to come to power, Collor symbolized class mobility - the ability of the poor to become rich with the free market growth of the capitalist pie. One combats misery, Baptista explained to me, with economic growth. "It is with profits that one builds democracy."

When I raised the question of the youth in the small town in Minas Gerais who had preferred communist Roberto Freire to Collor, Baptista attributed it to their lack of economic experience. "Youth are drawn to the idealism of modern socialism. That's because most don't yet feel the economic pressure. They feel much more strongly the question of social relationships, of social justice. Collor appeals to youth who already feel the pressure of the workforce. He calls not just for social justice, but for economic freedom."

While he was talking an aide was intent on drawing up a list, which he handed to me. It was entitled "The disillusionment of youth with classical Marxism" and listed points around the world where communism was in crisis or decline: China, Hungary, the Berlin Wall, perestroika, Thatcher's England, and Erundina's administration in São Paulo. "State-centered socialism is the wave of the past. Lula represents an archaic vision of society, which youth all over the world are rejecting. It can't be possible that they will choose this out-dated system for Brazil."

The disappearance of utopias?

It was no accident that both the left and the right seized upon the crisis in European communism to defend their own proposals. Eastern Europe has become the symbol of the worldwide "crisis of utopias" that has sent its ideological reverberations throughout Latin America. It has become cliché to say that revolutionary passion has lost its charm, that we have entered a pragmatic age that leaves old ideologies in the dust. "It's ironic that a

century that began with an abundance of social utopias (anarchism, socialism, etc)", said professor Luciano Martins of the University of Campinas, "runs the risk of ending without any."

The apparent failure of the socialist ideal has been used to explain the dominance of the neo-liberal discourse in all of the recent elections in Latin America. Since the great social utopias have traditionally come from the left, their decline opens the path for the growth of the center-right, which has been seen in Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Chile (where even candidates who seem to come from the left begin advocating a free market approach). Both Collor and Afif used news clips of crowds jumping off the Berlin Wall to show popular rejection of the repressive system they claimed the left wants to implant in Brazil. On the other hand, communist Roberto Freire took up the banner of perestroika as the initiation of "democratic socialism", while the youth of the PT and PCB expressed their identification with the desire for freedom of European young people. Is Eastern Europe the symbol of the failure of the socialist utopia, or its re-formulation? Is the socialist vision of the Latin American left defunct, or merely thrust into a confused re-evaluation of sacred ideological conceptions?

Those who declare that the symbolic appeal of the left has died forget how close Lula came to winning the election. In the second round of the campaign Lula managed a highly euphoric unification of progressive forces ranging from communist to social-democrat, with the backing of most of the intellectual and artistic voices in the country. In the final week he closed steadily the distance between himself and Collor, whose supporters walked around with anguished faces ("how can Brazil be so stupid?!"). Ironically, Lula won in almost all the state capitals, among the financially and educationally better off, while Collor won in the poorer regions of the interior with less educated populations. It is hard to call Lula a "pragmatic" choice for these middle class voters; if he won, the economic situation would very likely get worse, due to pressures from a decidedly unsympathetic international financial community. But Lula managed to fuse the political disillusionment of Brazilian voters with the idealistic symbolism of the socially just society, while Collor fused this same revolt among poorer voters with the individualist aspiration for economic opportunity.

I would hesitate to say that the political ambivalence of Brazilian young people indicates a death of utopia or a victory of pragmatism. While the symbols of freedom are certainly less dramatic (or perhaps simply more ambiguous) than in the 1960's, the desire for freedom and for "a better Brazil" still exist. Most youth still base their political choices on their personal identification with the images and ideas of candidates, rather than a pragmatic evaluation of proposals (which they have neither knowledge nor experience to make). Rather than sticking with safe, centrist candidates, they chose two young and untested figures who in ideologically opposite ways, vividly symbolized their hopes for themselves and Brazil. Utopia is not, after all, a phenomenon of the left or the right, but rather a product of the perceived limits and possibilities of an era, as well as a projection of the self-image of the utopic thinker.

What one does see among youth is a crisis in the symbols of political change. As I discussed earlier, youth question whether "democracy" means participation in decision-making, and whether "elections" mean the possibility of social change. The strongest symbolic foundations of western democracy have failed to become a reference point for these children of the dictatorship. Unaccustomed to taking initiative, but tired of political promises, a good part of the youthful population declares that "é tudo a mesma merda" - it's all the same shit.

On the other hand, these kids of the late 80's have not turned their rejection of political institutions into a revolutionary battle cry, as happened in the 1960's, when "my freedom" became the freedom of all people from all sorts of oppression, as symbolized by the "revolution". Without the symbolic clarities of 1968, youth are torn not between utopia and pragmatism, but between styles of utopia in transition. On the one hand, they feel drawn to the social utopias of Lula, Freire, and Covas, who emphasize social justice, the end of discrimination by class, race or gender, and government-sponsored equilibrium of economic relations. On the other hand, they identify with the economic utopias of Collor and Afif, who affirm that with less government control, youth will have the access to economic opportunity denied them by a corrupt and elitist system. The first of these requires the young person to generalize his personal aspiration, becoming part of a class (in the socialist vision) or a civil society (in social-democratic terms) that defends the rights of society as a whole. In the second, "society as a whole" becomes a secondary determinant of one's individual ambitions, although society must first be set to rights in order for one to have one's rightful chance.

If youth seem less willing to generalize their hopes in the great utopian tradition, this attitude could have two very different historical roots. First, it could result from their education under the dictatorship, which discouraged the collective view of social change and marketed an ideology of personal achievement. Second, it could reflect the ideological crisis within socialism, which boils down to the question of what role the individual plays within a collectivist vision of social organization. In either case, the dilemma is the same: where do I fit into all of these changes? These questions touch deeply the adolescent concern with his freedom and identity within a social structure. Utopia isn't dead, but utopian symbols are in transition, leaving youth in a painful state of political ambiguity.

Um abraço,



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PT - Worker's Party
 PRN - Party of National Reconstruction
 PMDB - Party of Brazilian Democratic Movement
 ARENA - Alliance for National Renovation
 MDB - Brazilian Democratic Movement
 PFL - Party of the Liberal Front
 PL - Liberal Party
 PSDB - Party of Brazilian Social-Democracy
 PCB - Brazilian Communist Party
 PCdoB - Communist Party of Brazil
 PDT - Democratic Labor Party
 PDS - Party of Social-Democracy