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AEM-3

Cesium and the search for marvels

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

Dear Peter,

I've just returned to São Paulo from a week-long trip to the city of Goiânia, most recently known as the site of Brazil's first nuclear accident. A piece of highly radioactive Cesium-137, abandoned in the ruins of the former Goiânia Institute of Radiotherapy, was discovered by a used-metal collector, carried home on the public buses, and proudly distributed to friends and family during a period of almost two weeks. So far four people have died and nearly twenty<sup>been</sup> interned due to varying degrees of contamination. Included among the deaths is that of a six-year-old girl who played with the glowing blue stone and became herself a fountain of radioactivity. Some have commented on the mystical fascination with which the stone was viewed - one of the friends of the discoverer of the "celestial blue" cesium made the sign of the cross on his chest with the stone, unaware that it would bring the farthest thing from a blessing.

For several weeks we in São Paulo (two states away) were bombarded daily with the latest developments - more internments, and then more deaths, tearful families and frightened neighbors, the killing of animals contaminated by the cesium, the arrival of U.S. and European experts, violent popular protests in the graveyard against the burial of the now radioactive bodies, demonstrations by environmentalists, accusations and evasions of official responsibility, and declarations on national television by the Chief of the National Commission on Nuclear Energy that there was "nothing to fear". So much was made of the incident by the officially regulated media (still under subtle but strong censorship, according to one young tele-journalist I talked to who left the field because of repressions) that one wonders whether Brazil was not a little proud to have this proof of having "entered the atomic age", a phrase I heard repeatedly during those weeks, usually with a faintly ironic sneer. Already the businesses and the politicians are taking advantage, with stores in Goiânia advertising themselves as "contaminated by low prices" and candidates promising a "brilliant future" for Goiânia. And of course the media-induced hysteria has had its discriminatory effects. Sales of milk and rice from the farmlands of the state of Goias have dropped, although these products represent no possible danger (and ironically Brazil had this year bought powdered milk from Europe with doses

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of radioactivity from Chernobyl.) Travelers from Goiânia found themselves forbidden to cross the border into neighboring states without official health certificates declaring them to be free from radioactivity. And a long planned national gathering of artists fell through because no one wanted to come to a "contaminated" city.

By the time I arrived in Goiânia, several weeks after the heart of the incident, no one wanted to talk about it. The media hysteria and exaggeration had soured Goiânians on the topic of cesium, and most were eager to return to normal. "We are cansadíssimos of radioactivity," I was told. And so during a very full five days which alternated between heated debates about socialism in education and equally heated lessons in dancing Samba and Furró (I've discovered how much Brazilians love a party) I spent little time discussing the incident. I did have one conversation with a young member of the PT (Partido do Trabalhador - Worker's Party) who lamented the fact that so little had been made of the incident in terms of mobilizing the people around environmental issues. It seems that the PT and the as of yet weakly organized PV (Partido Verde - Green Party) missed their chance to make the crucial link between immediate concerns and the wider world picture (the "totality", in marxist terminology), a link which is so big a tension among leftist movements here.\*

In the case of this accident, connections could have been made between the immediate fear of contamination and larger environmental issues, extending to a critique of capitalist and imperialist exploitation of national resources and Brazil's entrance into the nuclear race. At this time Brazil has one fully constructed nuclear plant near Rio, unopened as of yet for safety reasons. Severe criticisms have been made regarding its safety scheme, which only came into existence after Chernobyl, as well as its location. In the language of the indigenous people of the region, the name of the site means "pedra podre" - rotten rock - and according to satellite evaluations is seated among geologic faults receiving repercussions from the earthquakes of Latin America. Brazil is also rumored to have a clandestine project for the construction of an atomic bomb ("after all, Argentina is making one too") although obviously none of this was brought up in the media coverage of the cesium accident.

It is true that the dangers of radioactivity now have a very vivid place in the national consciousness. Robert Gale, a U.S. doctor imported to oversee the care of the victims and especially the administration of a new drug, CM-CSF, of which he is a pioneer, has estimated that five to ten thousand people in Goiânia will have to be monitored with preventative medicine in the next years. But it is also true that the nature of the incident, a case of negligence and ignorance regarding medical material, makes it less likely to provoke a criticism of nuclear energy as a whole. It can be seen (and sold by the nuclear establishment) as a freak lapse, a weakness in the country to be overcome, rather than the failure of a system. This perhaps accounts for the huge amount of media attention given

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\* As I mentioned in an earlier newsletter (AEM-1) the August attempt by the PT and the PCB (Communist Party of Brazil) to organize a general strike failed, among other reasons, because it failed to make a connection between the immediate salary/cost of living concerns of the average worker and its own largely political issues of direct elections, land reform, and non-payment of the external debt.

the incident, which fed the Brazilian public on the drama but in no way negated the banner that "progress and modernization", that is, the country's nuclear development, must continue.

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I had been invited to Goiânia to speak at the Federal University there about "Education in the First World", a rather broad challenge, but any "first worlder" here almost immediately becomes an expert (the opposite experience of many educated Brazilians in the United States.) The invitation had been extended by two graduate students in my course at PUC (Catholic University) in São Paulo, who every week make the arduous 13-hour bus ride from Goiânia and back again, because of the scanty offerings in the master's program in education at Federal University. These two, along with a group of two or three other radically oriented students, form the nucleus of the master's program in Goiânia. Politically they are aligned with the socialist PT, and educationally with Paulo Freire and "transformative pedagogy." It was interesting to note the split between this articulate and extremely critical group (who regularly meet over beers to discuss their ideas) and the rest of the course, for the most part consisting of teachers or teacher candidates with the traditional passivity and lack of initiative found in the teaching profession in Brazil. Most were doing the Master's course for the sake of much needed higher salaries. But even these were having their consciousness at least batted about by the more critical views of their colleagues.

As I talked with them about my own very critical views of U.S. education, I found myself in the position often experienced by U.S. travellers abroad of having to defend what at home you only criticized. This group of students had on the tips of their tongues all of the standard denunciations of the United States - capitalist, imperialist, individualist, bourgeois. I enjoyed wrangling with them to make the point that the U.S. might be all of those things, but it is also a lot more, discussing with them the cycles of reform and reaction in and out of the schools, and especially the internal contradictions and struggles involved in "democracy" and "equality of opportunity". As I tried to give them a picture of the re-interpretations of these ideas in keeping with the ideological and economic swings of the country, I kept coming back to that American optimism which is so strong a part of the successes and the blindnesses of the country - the faith in progress and technology, the ever-expanding margin of possibility, the ability to resolve all problems within the political and economic structures as they now stand.

It is an interesting experience to understand that optimism from the outside, that is, from the point of a Latin American country struggling to develop itself in the face of exploitation and extreme economic limits. United States optimism becomes seen as ingenuousness, arrogance ("you've never suffered") or even hypocrisy ("but look who you're exploiting".) At the same time, it is envied, imitated, and these days, sold through the media and other forms of official propaganda.

Here in Brazil I have been trying to understand the peculiar forms of optimism and pessimism showing themselves at this time. Take as an

example the pride in atomic energy (progress!) but the ironic grimace that of course Brazil was going to screw things up, due to the ineptness of its leaders and the ignorance of its people. In several of the schools I have visited I have been asking kids to scale their optimism and pessimism both about their personal futures and the future of the country, and explain the reasons for their choices. The scale I have been using is the following:

optimism						pessimism
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Brazil				Personal Life		

(students write reasons for their choices in this space)

As a result of this project I now have a collection of student writing about views of the future, which begins to supply me with the threads in their attitudes which go a bit deeper than the conversation with teenagers I described in my last newsletter. The most striking result at first glance is the extreme discrepancy expressed by these kids between their hopes for Brazil and their hopes for their personal lives. Most were extremely pessimistic regarding Brazil, choosing 5 to 7 (most pessimistic) but extremely optimistic regarding their personal futures, choosing 1 to 3. Why such a big contradiction? By this time I have become accustomed to a general negativity regarding Brazil, part of the mood of disanimation in the country. But why did so many perceive themselves to be capable of separating their personal future from that of the country?

This optimism was doubly puzzling given the educational situation in which I encountered the kids. The school in which I collected the largest number of responses was a night course of Segundo Grau, Brazil's equivalent of high school (following eight years of Primeiro Grau). I talked with and collected writing from about 100 kids in four classes of second and third series, the final two years before university or the workforce. Night session in these public secondary schools is well known as one of the weakest cycles in a very weak system. Most students come from families with few financial resources, which can be seen in the fact that most are studying by night because they have to work during the day. They arrive already exhausted, often without time to eat dinner or take a shower, and have to sit through four hours of largely uninspiring classes taught by teachers demoralized by unlivable salaries and scarcely workable teaching conditions. Segundo Grau is last priority for educational funds - probably because very few middle or upper class kids remain in the public school system up to this point.

Besides these structural weaknesses, nobody quite knows what the purpose is for Segundo Grau. It is only recently that a sizeable percentage of the general population began staying in school beyond the first eight years of basic schooling (if they stayed that long - the biggest moment of school drop-out in Brazil is still between first and second grades.) Segundo Grau was originally meant to serve as a link between basic schooling and

the universities, and does serve this purpose in the private colegios.

But during the push toward modernization during the 1970's, there arose a movement for the professionalization of the public secondary schools. They became seen as the place to train "mão-de-obra" (literally, work-hands) for their place in Brazil's industrializing economy. Professional training became obligatory, and many courses turned into narrow training for specific technical fields. The problem was that the schools were not adequately equipped to provide the kind of training needed by the large companies, who preferred to give their own training, and thus the technical diploma offered by Segundo Grau became devalued. Having had their teaching function narrowed and fragmented, the schools began to return to the original purpose of college preparation, but once again without adequate resources such as books, laboratories, and other pedagogic materials.

And so right now there exists a great confusion about just what is the purpose of Segundo Grau. One school principal I talked to defined the conflict as lying between the teachers, who pressed to raise "standards" for college preparation, and the students, who wanted courses which were more practical for entry into the work market. While it is true that there is a lack of respect within the schools for the needs and values of the student-worker, I'm not sure that this principal completely understood the desires of the students. Talking with students at this same school, I gathered that it wasn't so much that the kids didn't want to go to college, but that the difficulty in reaching the university itself created an ambiguity in the purpose of the education they were receiving. In my last newsletter I described some of the reasons for this difficulty, principally the highly competitive system of vestibular exams which endow (and restrict) entrance into the free public universities. Because of the general weakness of teaching in the public schools, most kids have little chance of reaching the university and achieving the dreams they described to me of being civil engineers, lawyers, psychologists, doctors, or journalists. Given the uncertainty of what comes next, and the possible practical necessity of sacrificing further study to enter the workforce immediately, the kids themselves are confused about what they want from the schools.

What then accounts for the optimism expressed by these kids of Segundo Grau, who had neither faith in their country nor in their educational formation to back up the "faith in myself" which so many described? As one student wrote, "My personal life, together with Brazil, is pretty poor. But, with optimism and confidence, I also think it could get better. The Brazilian people, however much they suffer, are still optimistic." To try and understand the various sources of this optimism I'd like to take you through some of the kids' own articulations about the position of youth in Brazil today.

\* \* \*

(The state of the country) is very bad, without conditions.  
There needs to be a great change if we are to have confidence  
. . . I hope that something marvelous happens so that we can  
have more hope . . .

Claudia, 17 years

I begin with this quote because it indicates an attitude deep in Brazilian culture: the sense of waiting for a miracle, a savior, a sudden

marvelous change that will turn everything around. It has roots in a religiousness which freely asks, and believes in the intervention of the saints (or the African deities super-imposed on them) in everyday life, such as to save a sick child, in return for which the asker makes a "promesa" to light so many candles or make a pilgrimage to the saint's shrine on his or her knees. Returning to Goiânia for a moment, the fascination of the people with the cesium can be understood in this way: it appeared as a shining blue gift from heaven. This attitude can also create a public prone to political demogoguery, as can be heard in the following statement:

I always have a hope that a person will appear who is very competent, who thinks not only in himself but in the people who need him so much. But it's hard, because while we think of this "someone" who will do something for the people, we only have to wait and have faith in the future.

Wilson, 17 years

Generations of politicians have known how to exploit this sense of waiting for "someone" to make their lives better. Of course the other side to this is the disillusionment that sets in when promises are not carried out, when the savior proves as self-serving as the next guy. I have seen a lot of this sort of disillusionment in my conversations with teenagers as well as adults. Among many young adults this depression is especially strong because they don't have the patience socialized into their long-suffering elders. They want the miracle now, but aren't willing (or don't know how) to commit themselves to the hard work that change would entail. I discussed this situation one night over pizza with a group of friends between 23 and 30 years of age, all of whom identified themselves as being or having been in various states of depression. Most had "in their younger days" been involved in some sort of political activism, mostly in degrees of opposition to the military. But the feeling now was "não adianta" - it won't do any good. The lack of participation experienced under the military was in some ways paralyzing. It could be that in today's fast paced world the patience of the miracle, which sustained and gave a sort of faith to past generations, is being succeeded by the impatience of the miracle, at least among urban young adults, which instead of sustaining pulls them into depression.

I don't have much optimism about the future of our country, but I'm also not pessimistic. I'm just afraid that it doesn't have a future . . . In my own life I have a lot of optimism about my future, as I know that the future depends only on myself.

Silvana, 18 years

In this last quote Silvana has gone beyond the state of miracle-waiting to the strain of individualism which is another response to the poor chances offered by the country. In fact, this sort of individualism was more common among the kids' responses than anything else. Over and over I heard references to "faith in myself" and "force of will" and "anything is possible if I try hard." For example, the following two responses:

To get something in life you have to have confidence in yourself. If I believe myself capable of fighting for something I want, I have the force - confidence, faith, and courage. You should never think negative and always positive.

Regina, 18 years

I plan to fight hard and at least try my luck, educate myself, get a good job, acquire much knowledge, and be able to give the minimum of comfort to my family. . . if possible, I will leave Brazil. Maybe outside things will be a little better.

Adilson, 20 years

Regina's faith in positive thinking could come out of a North American self-help book, which, incidentally, are selling well in Brazil, from Norman Vincent Peale to Leo Buscaglia. And Adilson gives a great re-statement of what we in the U.S. would call the "work ethic" - although it is significant that in order to succeed, he feels he needs to leave the country. Success is to be gained in spite of the country, individually. It is easier that way; you don't have to try and change society, which is probably why this sort of individual striving is supported by the official media. But such individual pragmatism loses its force of possibility in the wildness of despair and aspiration heard in this next response:

Politics are more and more in decline, the powerful are everyday more sinking the country, everyday inventing more systems but never giving satisfactory results, inflation is finishing with the country, but the politics that we have will never resolve the problem . . . my life is not one of the best, but a few years from now I plan to be an engineer and afterwards perhaps a cardiologist.

Sandro, 18 years

The question, of course, is how Sandro is ever going to become an engineer and then a cardiologist (he is now working as a mechanic). The ideal is strong, but wildly impractical. Because of all the social barriers described earlier, the road to engineering or cardiology is probably closed to him, making extremely unlikely a separation between personal future and the country's future of the sort proposed by Adilson. He is saddled with the country whether he likes it or not. And Sandro's response touches on another problem with Brazilian education, which is the need to make a choice very suddenly at the end of Segundo Grau. Liberal arts colleges do not exist in Brazil; when you take the vestibular you do so for a specific course at a specific university, such as economics or psychology or physics or pedagogy. Once admitted, you have your courses of study pretty much determined from the beginning to end, leaving no place for experimenting or changes of mind. And so even if Sandro were to succeed in entering the university to study engineering (a rare chance, given his conditions) he would have to give up, probably for once and for all, the idea of being a cardiologist. This creates an enormous pressure on teenagers toward the end of Segundo Grau, who have no practical basis for making a decision, but who often end up feeling guilty about their inability to choose, or later, their failure to find satisfaction in what they chose.

Perhaps one refuge from such pressures is what I call the official optimism in the country, the cult of happiness which is distributed principally by the media. The most popular (and most commercialized) children's show in Brazil is the Show de Xuxa, Xuxa being a charismatic, blond-haired, blue-eyed star with a huge smile and a flirtatious manner. Her daily show is filled with dancing, singing, games, and shouting children. One of the principle songs of the show is called "Eu sou Feliz!" (I am happy!) which to my perhaps prejudiced ears sounds more like a hysterical shriek than genuine joyfulness. But the kids in the country adore the show, and during this Christmas season are clamoring for Xuxa presents ranging from dolls and games to records, shoes, notebooks, and cosmetics. The adults, on the other hand, have Sílvio Santos, the domineering and ultra-rich owner of a leading television station, not to mention newspapers, businesses, and land all over the country. Every Sunday he goes on the air for the entire day, broadcasting a combination game show, entertainment, contests in singing and dancing, jokes and audience response. From time to time Sílvio Santos demands an answer from the audience - "Are you happy?" To which the audience must respond, "We're happy!" Sílvio Santos gained his power during the time of the military, principally because as he himself admits freely, he likes to praise and dislikes criticism, to the point of curtailing his journalists who take a critical stance toward the government or social norms.

Given the pervasiveness of this industry of happiness, it is small wonder that a good number of teenagers express opinions such as this:

I am an optimist as I in a certain way try not to see what happens around me, because doing so I would be one more to suffer from this crisis. My ideal is to see the good side of the country, the marvels that exist here, a tropical country with so much green, so many beautiful things. This makes me think that the country politically is falling, but socially I believe that a good part of the population thinks like me and lives with the marvels of this country.

Egmar, 18 years

We are back to the idea of "marvels" which we saw earlier with Claudia, who was waiting for something "marvelous" to happen so that she could have hope. Here the marvels are not soon to arrive in a miraculous future, but exist right here in the present, covering over all the signs of "crisis". The idea of the riches and beauty of Brazil is a recurring theme among the kids, although it is usually followed by the complaint that these riches are badly taken advantage of, or go to benefit only a few. And thus an intensifying factor in the lack of opportunities experienced by the kids is the sense, promoted by the media, that Brazil has so many opportunities. You hear echoes of the North American belief in ever-expanding possibilities, partly imported along with the multinationals, but also going back in Brazil's own history as a richly exploitable colony (which earlier than most was exploiting itself for itself, due to the removal of the Portuguese royal family to Brazil in 1808.) But if these riches are only reaching a few, then something must be wrong, from the point of view of the more critical kids who know how to analyse their own exclusion from opportunities:



I am pessimistic about the future of my country until the moment in which it has a cultural reform and in a certain sense a racial one. . . when we have changes in the way the government thinks, when they don't teach so much egoism and do teach fraternity between all . . . I can't be very optimistic about my future if my country doesn't give me conditins to study or work.

Euzebio, 19 years

These days Brazil is in very great ruins. For some years now, those in power and politics only think about money. No one wants to resolve the problem of the "external debt" and this disanimates the young people. Education is one example - ours is a joke, the teachers are not earning enough and with this many of them don't show a willingness to teach. This hurts us young people.

Denise, 19 years

In my life everything goes reasonable to bad, as in school what they teach me does me not good, the job that I hold is a drag and my conditions of life don't promise much for the future. . . . in spite of this capitalist country in which I live, and the conditions which don't promise much, I believe in my potencial and I have force of will. I will try to succeed in spite of the difficulties.

Edson, 16 years

These last three students were among the few who bridged the mythical separation between their personal lives and that of society - perhaps at the sacrifice of the various brands of optimism shown earlier. As a general tendency, those who tended to be more articulate, conscious, and critical of social conditins, those whom, for example, began to speak of a need for reform rather than just offering the standard denunciatiins, tended also to be more pessimistic in the ranking they gave for their personal lives. There was an exception here, that of Luiz, the impromptu poet whose work is transcribed on the next page. Luiz marked number 1 both for the country and for his personal life, despite offering an extensive social criticism and an exhortation to "struggle". He is 17 years old, works as a waiter, and wants to be a medical surgeon. And then from another student I received this manifesto:

I am a youth who tries to live as coherently as possible in defence of a social transformation. Coherently how? Living an ideal of preferential options for the unfavored classes, feeling myself to be the people, seeing the suffering faces of these people as scars on my own body . . . Every being should try to be conscious, as I try to live and fight so that this country will be really a country of hope, then I will be able to be optimistic, and be able to think about a marvelous country for the future.

Rinaldo, 20 years

Once again arises the theme of a "marvelous" future for Brazil, but this time from the point of view not of a miracle. but of a struggle for

Nome: Luiz Wagner Santos nº 10 Série 2º D

Otimismo

Pessimismo

← 2 3 4 5 6 7 →

A luta existe  
 E muitos fracassam  
 Porém na comunidade  
 muitos ultrapassam  
 E vencendo barreiras  
 Seremos os máximos  
 Sem pessimismo  
 Seremos libertados  
 Para sermos felizes  
 Em qualquer lugar  
 do espaço

É so isso que eu acho

A luta existe  
 E muitos fracassam  
 Porém na comunidade  
 Muitos ultrapassam  
 E vencendo barreiro  
 Sermos os máximos  
 Sem pessimismo  
 Sermos libertados  
 Para sermos felizes  
 Em qualquer lugar  
 do espaço.

É so isso que eu AC

Luiz Wagner Santos

17 years

Work now: waiter

Intended career:

medical s

Translation:

The struggle exists  
 And many will fail.  
 Still in the community  
 many overcome  
 and defeating the barriers,  
 we will be the maximum  
 without pessimism  
 we'll reach liberation  
 so that we'll be happy  
 in whatever location or  
 space.

And that's what I THINK.

social change. Some of my readers may have already guessed what Rinaldo wants to be in the future - a Catholic priest. He has already mastered the basics of Liberation Theology. But that's another story . . .

With this I'll bring to a close my ramble through the attitudes of some São Paulo youth. I don't pretend here to give an exhaustive study of the "conditions of Brazilian youth", but rather register and develop some of my impressions from these first three months of observations and conversations. It is important to keep in mind that this collection of responses, contradictory and diverse as it is, comes from just one group of teenagers in Brazil - that of lower to middle class working youth. The lives of middle to upper class youth, as well as those of the very poor or those living in rural regions, will be considerably different in the barriers and possibilities experienced, although all will show some common threads coming from the Brazilian culture as a whole.

It will be interesting to follow the development of the various strands I have isolated here - those of miracle-waiting, of individual success, of official happiness, of social criticism and of exhortation to struggle - especially as Brazil moves into the flurry, confusion, and re-enforced optimism of an election year. It will also be interesting to see if election acts and promises will succeed in pulling the country out of the low moment of disanimation and disillusionment it is experiencing right now, and which these kids are absorbing as they make crucial decisions about their futures.

Take care,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Ann Miché". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed text "Take care,".

Received in Hanover 12/23/87