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AEM-4

The Fall and Rise of Grêmios Livres

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Dear Peter,

Schools have been closed for summer vacation during most of December and January, bringing to an end the epoch of school visits that occupied my first months here. But having gotten a taste of the difficult reality inside the schools, I have begun shifting my attention to the various sources of popular militancy in and around the issue of education in São Paulo.

I've recently moved to the Zona Leste (East Zone) of São Paulo, an interesting place for me because it is the center for social movements in the city. It's also the section of the city in which the conditions of life are most difficult for the majority of the people living there. The three images that come to mind to describe my new locale are factories, mosquitoes, and eucalyptus trees. For some reason eucalyptus trees stand out for me as being on the fighting edge of poverty, perhaps originating from my stay in Bogotá, Colombia, where eucalyptus trees lined the shacks of the mountainside invasion communities. Did breathing the bracing eucalyptus-filled air, I wondered, keep the children healthier than would have otherwise been possible, given the relative squalor of their lives?

With these speculations, I am once more living in the midst of eucalyptus trees, this time bordered by a metal-working factory, in an apartment invaded nightly by mosquitoes spawned by the polluted river several blocks away. Here in the Zona Leste, a large stretch of the city extending outward toward the "periferia" which is organized into multiple small neighborhoods or "vilas", you find the highest concentration of industries, favelas, poor to middle class neighborhoods becoming poorer as the city extends eastward. On the extreme eastern edge of the city you find the unasphalted, near shack-like conditions that are standard in Latin America; even further in toward the center where I am living, services such as water are prone to stop for hours at a time, something that rarely happens in the bourgeois West and South Zones. But because of the difficult conditions of life in the Zona Leste, the region has an impetus toward politization and community organization which is rare to find in other parts of the city in this moment of political disanimation in Brazil.

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In the Zona Leste, for example, it's hard to find a "vila" that doesn't have a sizable portion of its empty walls painted with the slogans of the PT, PCdoB, or PDT\*, three of Brazil's principal leftist political parties with varying degrees of radicality. One of the points of consensus of these three parties is the demand for "Direitas 88", direct elections in 1988, a proposition which is in doubt right now due to the political struggles in the Constitutional Assembly. After much debate, the committee of systematization for the constitution had agreed upon a four year mandate for current president José Sarney, which would mean presidential elections this year. But a coalition of centrist delegates succeeded in overturning the procedural rules of the assembly, opening the possibility of an amendment extending Sarney's mandate for five years (elections in 1989). All of which means considerable uncertainty for the political future of this year, for which had been scheduled not only presidential elections (if approved by the constitution) but also elections for mayors, councilmen, and various other local offices. This uncertainty has not stopped the PT from being the first political party to officially launch a candidate for president, Luis Inacio da Silva, the long-time popular leader of the PT with roots in the labor movement, more popularly known as "Lula". And so "LULA PRESIDENTE-PT" is now scrawled in red paint in various parts of the city, but principally in all corners of the Zona Leste.

The PT is a very interesting political party, which I will spend some future newsletter describing in more detail. I'll just introduce it here by saying that the brand of socialism that gave it its founding vision in 1979 is of the Paulo Freire variety - that is, not founded in ties to the USSR, China, or any other socialist/communist models but having as its base the popular movements within Brazil. Its mission is to work towards socialism through the progressive "conscientization" (for more explanation, see AEM-1) and articulation of these movements through democratic dialogue, rather than through the ideological "vanguardism" typical of communist parties worldwide. It has its political base in many hundreds of community nuclei, or "articulations", through which it maintains its internal commitment to democracy, to the upward motion from the bases, and its pedagogic mission of raising consciousness and mobilizing action about issues of concern to workers and oppressed groups within the population.

These at least are the principles of the PT. In practice this is much more complicated, given the breadth and variety of ideological articulations among the left in Brazil, and the tensions necessarily involved in giving a democratic voice to all of its "tendencies", as the various ideological positions within the PT are called. For example, the fact that the PT is committed to open, democratic dialogue does not exclude the presence of various ideologically exclusive tendencies within the PT, including several Marxist/Leninist factions, a Trotskyist group, and tendencies advocating armed struggle, mostly survivors of the urban and rural guerrilla movement of the military years. On the other hand, stronger among the PT's popular bases are the labor movement and the multiple community-based programs originating most often in the Catholic Church. These range from movements in education, housing, health, transportation, culture and communication, to women's groups, youth groups, worker's organizations and neighborhood councils. Many of these organizations are offspring of the "option for the poor" and the "comunidades de base" that emerged in the Catholic Church with Vatican II and liberation theology, which has a strong expression in the archdiocese of São Paulo.

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\*PT: Partido dos Trabalhadores - Worker's party

PCdoB: Partido Comunista do Brazil - Communist Party of Brazil

PDT: Partido Democrático dos Trabalhadores - Democratic Worker's Party (a social democratic party)

The PT has its strongest roots in the Zona Leste because that is where the popular movements are strongest. I have recently been involving myself with various people and groups within these movements, principally the "Movimento de Educação da Zona Leste" (Educational Movement of the East Zone), a widely based umbrella organization covering projects ranging from popular literacy training (Paulo Freire style) to groups of students, parents and teachers, to agitation for better conditions in the schools to a proposal to establish a "Universidade do Trabalhador" (Worker's University) in the Zona Leste. Within this movement I have been discussing the possibility of doing some sort of work with teenagers, such as starting a youth group or participating in some project for youth in the favelas or poor neighborhoods. Since for the moment even social movements are in summer holidays, I have just been going to many meetings of leadership, which leaves me hungry to work directly with kids but which has given me an interesting chance to grasp the mechanics of popular organization. But this again I will save for a future newsletter. For the rest of this report I would like to shift my focus to the political dynamics of the organization of student movements here in São Paulo.

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The PT is a remarkably young party when viewed from the age of its members. The party leadership estimates that 10% of its members are university students or "secundaristas" (equivalent of U.S. high school students, although the age range is much greater than in the U.S., due to the difficulties in reaching the secondary level for most of the population.) Due to the umbrella nature of most of the activism of the left (if you are involved with one movement, you are involved with several or all) most of these same secundaristas are also involved in the movement to establish "grêmios livres" within their respective schools. In my visits to schools in the past few months and in my various contacts with "petistas" (members of the PT) I have come to know many of these students. Their experience in trying to organize student groups within the schools provides some interesting insights into the political process right now in Brazil and how it is shaping and limiting student attempts at participation.

To give a bit of background, a "grêmio livre" is a free student organization, completely organized and run by students independent of control by principals or school administrations. It can do anything from organizing parties, sports, or cultural events to publishing newspapers, stimulating debates and agitating for student rights and better conditions within the school. Depending on a grêmio's degree of radicality, its function can extend outside the school to support for political parties and proposals ranging from the right to vote at age 16 to non-payment of the external debt. In fact, the diversity and ambiguity in the possible functions of grêmios is one source of the difficulties they face in getting themselves out of the dream stage and into practice.

While grêmios livres and various national and local organizations of secundaristas existed before the repression of 1964, they were banned during the military period and replaced by "Centros Cívicos", student organizations tied to school administrations (and thus to the state), with authority merely for organizing parties or sports events or other politically innocuous activities. As the military government began opening to democracy in the early 1980's, various national entities of secundaristas were re-legalized, such as UBES (Brazilian Union of Secondary Students) and UMES (Municipal Union of Secondary Students). These groups lobbied for the re-establishment of the right to form

independent student organizations, contributing to the pressure which in 1985 succeeded in seeing passed a federal law guaranteeing the right to organize grêmios. At this point emerged the question so prevalent at this moment in Brazil - we have freedom, now what do we do?

To explore this question I'd like to describe two different experiences in starting grêmios. The first is a heroic individual attempt that failed, while the second is the beginnings of a student movement to provide the support lacking in the first case. The practical and political difficulties in both cases need to be understood within the context of Brazil's ambiguity about what democracy means in its day-to-day expressions.

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I was introduced to Gregorio, the president of the grêmio at the school EESG Zuleiko de Barros, by the principal, a classmate of mine at PUC (Catholic University) who invited me to visit. The story which follows is drawn from several long conversations with Gregorio, with Renato, his vice-president, with Dona Laés, the principal, and from several auxiliary conversations with teachers and students in the school, to which I made a series of visits. This particular school is undergoing changes due to the arrival of Dona Laés as the new principal in the middle of the year. She has had a difficult year, seeing as she arrived in the school with her view of education liberalized by contact with Paulo Freire at the PUC, where the ideas of "liberation pedagogy" have a stronghold. Her ideas came into shock with the practical reality of a secondary school which, as some indication of how poorly it is serving the needs of its students, last year suffered a drop-out or failure rate of 75%. Given the widespread accommodation of students and teachers to the poor state of the school, Laés' attempts at democratic changes in the school have been labeled as authoritarian. But that's another story. On to Gregorio and his grêmio.

Gregorio is an adolescent who occupies space as if he were walking onto a bandstand, always with a bit of a strut, arms swinging to all sides to slap someone on the back, to shake a hand, to make a point with as much drama as he can muster. It is not uncommon to see him defend a point of view saying "I'm president of the grêmio!", thumbs to his chest as if he were snapping imaginary suspenders. He might be greeted by jeers, to which he will respond with clownish defiance, keeping his friends but keeping his superiority at the same time.

Two years ago, when he entered the school, he began wanting to form a grêmio at Zuleiko. His head was full of ideas, such as starting a newspaper, organizing sports and dramatic events, bringing speakers to the school about such issues as AIDS, sex, nuclear war, and perhaps the most ambitious project, using money from these events to re-open the laboratories in the school. He began agitating with the principal (the one before Laés, much less liberal in her attitudes), with the "delegada" (one level up) and as he met with resistance, continued his appeal to the secretary of education. He was put off and again put off, two years of agitation and deadlock, until finally in June of this year the delegada, who was by this time a friend of his, gave her permission. It only remained to get the permission of Dona Laés, who was

just entering as principal and who wasn't at all eager to deal with a bunch of hot-headed adolescents upsetting an already unstable transition. Laés tried to get Gregorio and his friends to wait until the end of the year (December) but the kids fought and fought and finally got approval. Laés then stood back and let things take their course, which was as Gregorio wanted, since he wanted to prove that the students could do it alone - "Nós somos jovens mas nós temos cabeças."\*

This, perhaps, ended up being the biggest weakness of the grêmio - the isolation first from the larger structure of the school and later from the rest of the student body as well, since more and more it seemed to be coming solely from the "cabeça" of Gregorio, without backup from the school or the active initiative of the other students to make it work. But that's jumping ahead a bit. After gaining authorization to begin a grêmio, Gregorio went about mobilizing the school. It is interesting here to note the beginnings of democracy.

The first step was organizing a party ("chapa"). Gregorio would have preferred to have just one party ("chapa única") but by some process of disputation two chapas were formed, "so it would be more democratic." That's when things got hot. The kids know all about elections - politicians in the street, with megaphones, hand-shaking, promises, all of which is political tradition in Brazil. The kids had it all, with the exception of an agreement not to disturb classes and not to write on the walls, which the politicians (or their supporters) do freely. Gregorio described the action in the school patio - he on one bench with a megaphone, exhorting one group of students, his competition on another bench on the other side, students milling around, promising themselves to one side or the other, the excitement of the pursuit of victory. In this process of elections (common among organizations such as unions, student movements, and popular advocacy groups of all kinds) it is not the leaders which are elected directly, but the entire chapa, which then internally selects its leadership. In this case the chapa of Gregorio won, probably based both on his charisma and on the fact that he refused to name the leaders-to-be in the chapa until after the election. The other chapa already had its leadership slate set, "so why should anyone work?" said Gregorio with political saavy.

With his chapa duly elected, Gregorio called the first meeting. The first job was to select leaders. The best plan, he thought, would be to proceed democratically, and so he opened the discussion - who wanted what position? The plan for leadership was complicated in typical Brazilian style: after president, vice-president, 2 secretaries and 2 treasurers, came the director of press, director of public relations (internal and external), director of sports, directors of culture (parties and theater), each of these directorships having sub-divisions for the morning, afternoon, and evening sessions of the school. Nominations were made, and right away it turned into a political game - "if you vote for me, I'll vote for you", the opportunistic politicking of which the kids have seen countless examples. Gregorio sat watching, a sinking feeling in his stomach, until finally he received in his hands the paper with the results. He looked at it and tore it up. "This is worth nothing," he said. "I only let you do this to test if you knew how to be democratic. Obviously, you don't. Tomorrow I will bring the list of who will take what position."

From then on the grêmio entered another stage, which Laés calls "authoritarian." Gregorio came in the next day with the list of positions

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\* literally, "we are young, but we have heads."

that he had already partly worked out in his mind, based on his observations of who worked hardest during the campaign, who had enthusiasm, commitment, and ideas. He presented the list: "I'm going to be president because of this and this and this..., Renato is going to be vice because of this and this..., Maria Luisa will be director of press because of this... (etc.) Does anyone have any problems?"

Only one student objected, not to the selections themselves, which everyone pretty much agreed were deserved and much more fair than the fraudulent elections, but to the authoritarian procedure. "In this way I don't want it," he protested. "Fine," responded Gregorio. "If you don't like it, you don't have to participate." And the lone defender of democracy dropped out. The others remained, a bit chastened, but impressed with the order. You can see why authoritarianism has an appeal in Brazil and other Latin American countries - "democracy" brings disorder, opportunism, corruption, which authoritarianism may bring (or appear to bring, if you escape its brutal repression) a return to order, "fairness", and just deserts. And given the fact that the participants themselves knew themselves to be guilty of the degeneration of democracy, what arguments could they muster against authoritarianism? "No, I guess we really aren't capable of choosing honestly for ourselves."

With leaders chosen and a head full of plans, Gregorio once again called a meeting. "People, let's go to work." Having once exercised authority, he was again ready to proceed democratically. Did anyone have any ideas as to what they should do? Blank faces. What would they think, say, of having a newspaper? "Vamos fazer, vamos fazer!\*" One by one Gregorio began dropping his ideas into the group. Once an idea was located, people again became excited. The director of press was put in charge of the newspaper, then left to his own resources. The same with the other projects: a samba party (director of culture-parties) a free theater program on Saturdays (director of culture-theater), championships in soccer, volleyball, basketball and chess (director of sports) presentations of real-life issues (director of public relations-internal) interchange with other schools (director of pub. rel,-external). The grêmio was full of projects. "I'm here to help," said Gregorio, "but you all have freedom to develop the projects as you think best. Let's go to work."

Right then, unfortunately, school let out for a two week vacation. People returned with their minds elsewhere. The energy and ideas had dissipated (probably because they weren't really there in the first place, were only an emanation from Gregorio.) Gregorio called meeting after meeting, dogged the steps of various directors to see how the projects were (or weren't) coming, received promises and promises and excuses and excuses. In the end, none of the projects were realized, with the exception of the samba party, which succeeded in raising only 5 people the first night and 15 the night after. Gregorio and Renato (the vice) worked hard planning this party, spending their own money, only half of which they received back.

By this time the grêmio was in reality consisting only of Gregorio and Renato. As people lost interest, or didn't produce, Gregorio began re-assigning positions, against objections at first, but once again objections fell into silence because after all the student in question had not worked, was nothing

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\* "Let's do it, let's do it!"

more than an unpaid "marajá"\*, basking in the title but producing nothing. Pretty soon there was no one left to receive re-assignments. While officially the grêmio had 22 members, in reality it had only two. Gregorio and Renato remained, disillusioned, with personal problems on top of this let-down. Bitterest of all after the energy put into the project, they had to bear the accusations of the other students, "this grêmio doesn't do anything."

On observing the situation, Laés decided to involve herself. In this state of disillusionment, <sup>Gregorio</sup> ~~Laés~~ was ready to accept the help he would have rejected before. Laés met with him and Renato several times to discuss the situation, and came up with a list of concrete things they could do within the school, such as agitate for better trash collection, construct posters with thoughts about education, organize a party for the last day of school, and if the teachers were willing, help to organize an exposition of student work which Laés was hoping to present at the end of the year. While the boys regained some degree of animation with these proposals (at least according to Laés), it was still a blow to be accepting proposals from the principal, and on such a reduced level (remember, Gregorio's ambition was to reopen the laboratories of the school!) Besides, it was by this time the end of the year, and the two of them would be graduating. "I feel sorry for Dona Laés," said Gregorio. "Next year we won't be here, and what will happen to the grêmio then?"

I asked the boys to analyze why they thought the grêmio had failed. Gregorio takes the cynical view. "You know what I think? It's that no one does anything for free. If we had paid people to organize a newspaper, we would have had an issue every day, let alone every other week."

Renato has a more pragmatic explanation. "It's that people here have other things on their minds. Those who study at night work all day, have lives full of problems, don't have the time or interest to commit themselves."

In the end these two explanations do not contradict each other. Not even Gregorio does anything for "free" - he had plenty to gain in terms of ambition, pride, accomplishment. But for the other students in the school, the energy to be spent was not worth the return. As Renato noted, most of these students are "muito sofrido", studying by night because of the necessity of holding down a job during the day, with extremely limited perspectives for their futures. And as mentioned earlier, the grêmio had no system of support within the school. No guidance was offered by teachers, for example, on how to organize a newspaper or a drama group, and there was no system of rewards, such as gaining academic credit for grêmio related activities. On the contrary, the boys' grades had fallen considerably because of the amount of time spent working on the grêmio. So what was the recompense, compared with the hard demands of living faced by many of these students?

Gregorio tends to place all the blame for the failure of the grêmio on the backs of the other students; what he doesn't like to acknowledge are the structural difficulties within the school itself and his own pride in dealing with them. There simply does not exist tradition or infra-structure for the many activities he was so eager to organize. In the United States, for example,

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\* a "marajá" is an public official, often linked to the military, who receives a huge salary for doing little or no work. Recently there have been multiple exposures of such scandalous earners on the government payroll, some of whom have and some of whom haven't been removed from their positions. One teenager told me that his ambition for the future was to be a marajá.

a load of student activities is built into the routine of the school - student government, academic and social clubs, debating societies, student newspapers and literary magazines, sports competitions. In most cases everything is already set for students to step into established positions and activities, at times with budgets set and teachers advising. Few of these structures exist in Brazilian schools, and so student organizations take on a much more militant and ambiguous character. As I said earlier, Gregorio didn't want to ask Laés for help in any form - one of the credos of the grêmio movement is that a "grêmio livre" should be free from any intervention from school administration. This militancy in turn comes as a response to the Centro Cívicos during the military period, in which student groups were severely regulated and in effect sterilized from any contamination by political or reivindicatory activities. As a result, today the independence of grêmios is fiercely defended, often justified by the repressive attitude of school administrations. But this fierce autonomy is maintained perhaps at the expense of the integration into the school as a whole which could help ensure its survival.

Gregorio complains that among the teachers in the school, "not one of them showed the slightest interest in what we were doing." It is doubtful, however, if he approached them or even projected an openness for their participation. The art education teacher, well liked for his active, relaxed classes, told me a bit scornfully that Gregorio's problem is that he wants to do everything alone. And as I described in an earlier newsletter (AEM-2) the teachers themselves are overworked, underpaid, and thus with little enthusiasm for those "extra" (unpaid) projects which have such unrealistic grounding. Where, for example, were the funds and the materials for the newspaper to come from? Not from the school, which barely receives enough money to keep itself running.

The isolation and lack of support experienced by the grêmio mirrors the position of the schools themselves. A past governor of São Paulo, Paulo Maluf, made a promise to build "a school a day", and so schools appeared in packs all over the city. But once the buildings are constructed and the teachers hired, the schools (especially secondary schools) are left to their own resources, that is, none at all. Zuleika, for instance, is the rare beneficiary of a 400-seat auditorium that is falling to pieces from disuse, as well as several art and science laboratories without equipment or materials. And at this point it is unlikely that the teachers would know how to use these resources were they opened to them, much like the students in the grêmio simply had no idea how to go about organizing a newspaper or a theater project. And thus the easy road to disanimation. Brazil suffers from what I have called the mentality of "vamos fazer!" (let's do it!), the burst of enthusiasm and promises without infrastructure, resources, experience, or personal drive to carry through. Its sister attitude is "não adianta" (it won't do any good.) And in this way real social and economic barriers, as well as the habit of inaction, result in repeated cycles of enthusiasm and disillusionment.

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If the weakness of Gregorio's grêmio was its isolation and his desire to do everything alone, other sorts of problems arise once students begin to locate their individual struggles within a larger social movement. At this moment the movement to establish grêmios in São Paulo is moving in two directions. On the one hand, isolated groups of students in isolated schools (like Gregorio



at Zuleiko) are organizing themselves, usually in response to the extremely poor educational and physical conditions of most public secondary schools. At times, but not always, these students are already politicized to some degree by their association with political parties such as the PT or PCdoB. In the other direction, the student entities mentioned earlier (UBES, UMES), which consider themselves the "vanguard" of the student movement, exercise a downward pressure for the establishment of grêmios in accordance with their own directives and proposals. This countermovement up from the bases and down from the entities has created certain problematic relationships in the development of grêmios.

My next account has to do with the attempt by a group of secundaristas to democratize this process. Rather than moving from enthusiasm to disillusionment, it moves from disillusionment to the attempt to find a response.

In 1987 UMES (Municipal Union of Secondary Students) sponsored a city-wide congress in São Paulo, inviting secondary schools all over the city to elect delegates. 150 students from São Paulo attended the congress, including a friend of mine, Cida, who at the time was finishing her last year of secondary school and was (and remains) extremely active in the militancy of the PT. She was elected as a delegate by her school, where she had been participating in the discussions and pressures to form a free grêmio. She went to congress as an independent student, not connected to the leadership of UMES nor to the opposition group within the entity.

As I described earlier, most popular organizations such as UMES are divided into chapas (small parties or chapters) which are elected popularly and then internally select their leadership. Those excluded from leadership because they belong to another chapa, rather than assuming a minority voice within the decision-making process, turn into opposition, assuming as their purpose the constant raising of criticism and counter-proposals with the objective of gaining support to win in the next election.

In the case of UMES (known as an "entity" because it is a legally recognized organization), two chapas exist. The first consists of those involved in the current leadership, the election of which was one of the purposes of the congress. Most of those in the leadership have ties to the PCdoB, one of Brazil's two communist parties, which prides itself on having neither the USSR nor China as a model, but rather the socialist organization of Albania. The other chapa, serving as opposition, consists mainly of students involved in the "Convergência Socialista", a Marxist-Leninist tendency within the PT.

My friend Cida arrived at the congress without connection to either chapa, eager to discuss with others in the student movement the real problems involved in trying to organize grêmios within the schools. Cida herself is from a tendency within the PT which has strong roots in the popular movements of the Zona Leste. This group of petistas, which identifies itself by name with the PT slogan, "Poder Popular e Socialismo" (popular power and socialism - PPS) is one of the most democratically oriented tendencies within the PT, seeking articulation of the bases of social movements (education, housing, health, unions, etc.) rather than following a rigid ideological line. In some future newsletter I will explain more about the complicated relationship between the leadership of the PT with its various tendencies and its popular bases, a highly conflicted process in pursuing democracy and revolution at the same time.

But in any case, Cida, who works as a secretary to one of the leaders of the PPS within the PT, was coming into the conference with a political orientation toward the democratic participation of the bases, as well as her own need to discuss with others her experience in the schools. She felt frustrated and repressed by the attitude taken by the leadership of UMES toward the students it was "helping". She left the conference disillusioned with UMES and convinced of the need for some other movement of students to get beyond the impasse experienced at the congress.

To understand the source of this impasse and of Cida's disillusionment, I'd like to describe a meeting I attended with Cida and several other students in early December. The meeting took place at night in a school in São Mateus, a neighborhood of the "periferia" of the Zona Leste. A group of secondary students from this school had recently started a grêmio, which they called MOREES (Movimento Revolucionario Estudantil). After a difficult struggle, the group had succeeded in winning from the school principal not only the right to form a grêmio, but also a bit of infrastructure, consisting of a small room for meetings into which about 15 of us crowded that evening. Seated on chairs, the table, and on the floor, the group consisted of nine students from the school, all of them male, two of them sporting the red and white star which is the emblem of the PT; three students from the outside, consisting of Cida and two friends - Toni and Fran; and myself, vaguely identified as a "companheira" from the United States, which raised the usual barrage of questions after the meeting was over.

The purpose of the meeting was to give the students of MOREES, who were just starting out, a chance to discuss the problems involved in starting a grêmio with those who already had experience both in the schools and in the educational movement of the Zona Leste. Cida, Toni, and the others are among a group of secundaristas involved in the leadership and organization of various popular movements in the Zona Leste. I have recently spent a lot of time going to meetings with them, ranging from discussions of grêmios to proposals for the "universidade do trabalhador" (mentioned earlier) to debates about the role of socialism within the PT and support for political candidates.\*

Cida and Toni had made contact with the students in São Mateus as part of a larger effort to establish dialogue among as many schools as possible in the region. As a result of the dissatisfaction with the role of UMES in "assisting" grêmios, and the realization of the common nature of problems such

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\* Several weeks earlier, for example, I had gone to a meeting in the neighborhood of Guaianazes (extreme eastern "periferia") in which students from 20 schools in the Zona Leste were called together in a series of three meetings to discuss ways of responding to the repression that many grêmios (or attempted-grêmios) were experiencing from school administrations. The occasion for the meetings was the suspension of nine students from a school in Guaianaizes, who had been reprimanded for their political and pro-grêmio agitation. The suspension provoked a violent reaction among the students of the school, who invaded a meeting of the school council, denounced the principal to the local delegacy of education, and went to the press with their protests. The principal ended up being relieved of her position, and the grêmio is now functioning normally in the school. But most of the schools in the region are not so strongly mobilized, and their relative isolation makes it difficult to struggle against the reluctance of

as repression that were brought to light at the meetings in Guaianazes (see footnote, page 10), a movement is evolving to develop a "Comissão Pro-Gremio" to do what UMES fails to do - invite those in the schools for an exchange of experience and support for the day-to-day difficulties of student organization. This attempt at dialogue via the "Comissão Pro-Grêmio" is being coordinated by Cida, Toni, and about 12 others who attended the meetings at Guaianazes.

This night in the school in São Mateus, discussion centered around the relationship between groups such as MOREES emerging from direct experience in the schools, and the larger, "ordering" entities such as UMES, which try to exercise a controlling, directive force. It happened that several of the students had gone to the same conference as Cida, and left with the same feeling of disillusionment and alienation. The problem, as they articulated it, was that rather than being invited to share their experiences with others experiencing similar problems, and rather than participating in sessions of strategizing from the base up, they spent the entire congress listening to speeches from the leadership about what was a free grêmio, what it should advocate educationally and politically, what the role of the student movement is and should be in Brazil today. While these topics might be interesting if approached from a basis of discussion, most of the students coming into the "student movement" for the first time felt themselves to be paternalized and manipulated. "Those who know more swallow those who are just beginning," one of the students said. "How are you going to start something if someone gives you all the rules?"

In the language of the popular movements, the stance of UMES is known as an "assistentialist" attitude. Assistance is offered by some entity which considers itself superior, without becoming genuinely involved in your struggle or inviting your involvement in the assistance offered. I heard the same term used to criticize the overtures of the largely elite and conservative University of São Paulo to aid in the creation of the "University do Trabalhador", a long worked for dream of the educational movement, with the objective of giving those with little money a chance for community based higher education. Those who had spent years in the struggles of literacy work and community education in the favelas and poor industrial neighborhoods felt themselves to be paternalized by the academic interests of many of the professors involved, and manipulated by the underlying political motives - a chance for USP to increase its prestige in terms of "service to the community."

In the case of the congress of UMES, the students' alienation was increased by the growing discovery of the link between the leadership of UMES and the PCdoB. This link is not a declared affiliation (the PCdoB likes to work in semi-secrecy) but could be recognized as one of its typical attempts to conquest blocks among sectors of the left, of which the student movement is an important prize. There is nothing a freshly militized adolescent dislikes more than to feel himself a pawn of a political party. All of a sudden it was not just the problems of the schools that were being shouted about from the podium, but land reform, the right to strike, non-payment of the external debt, all of which these students may or may not have agreed with. But the point was

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most school principals to allow grêmios an active voice in the school. Toni, for example, was recently given a "compulsory transference" (read, expulsion) from his school on charges of indiscipline, due to his stridency in agitating for grêmios and better educational conditions in his school.

that the issues at hand, ostensibly education and the right to form grêmios, were being departed from without discussion, leaving students with merely a new set of slogans and a greater feeling of manipulation.

In relation to the opposition *chapa*, which I said earlier was linked to the "Convergência Socialista" within the PT, Cida for one felt less alienated, because the group was at least agitating for the open participation of all students, not just the leadership. But it would be interesting to see if this stress on participation is simply a necessary political posture of an opposition party, and whether once they arrived in leadership they would turn just as exclusive. This seems especially likely given the fact that the Convergência within the PT is a highly ideologically exclusive faction, following a strict Marxist-Leninist line. One of the stances of the opposition *chapa* is that all students in the movement must be militantly active in some political party, since, as the argument goes, all of the problems in the schools are ultimately political (why, for instance, do schools in the "periferia" receive so little money? The forces of capitalism at work ...) While this line of reasoning is highly attractive to some (for one thing, it clears up a lot of complicated questions) for others this sort of theorizing seems one more flight from addressing the specific problems of education which the grêmios are hoping to confront.

Given their experience with groups such as these, the students of the grêmio of São Mateus became slightly defensive on learning of the formation of the Comissão Pró-Grêmio. They had had a bad experience with the conference of UMES - what was to keep this commission from becoming just one more entity, telling them how they should do things without understanding the specific situation of their school? Their concerns had to do with raising the interest of a super-apatetic student body, establishing a leadership structure and a process of participation, writing the statutes of the organization, deciding whether to have one *chapa* or two, how to get past the blocks thrown in their path by the school principal, and then what to do when they got started - organize "festas"? agitate to raise the level of teaching? support the PT and Lula for president? Was the Comissão Pro-Grêmio going to help them find their own solutions to these problems, or would it be one more case of the larger group swallowing the smaller?

Toni told me later that at meetings of *secundaristas* such as this he misses the rowdy meetings of the militancy of the PT, where you can curse everyone and his mother and people will understand. "With *secundaristas* you have to be so careful," he complained. Teenagers entering political militancy have a double desire to feel part of a larger movement, and feel that one is inventing that movement for the first time. Any indication to the contrary (the paternalistic "I know better") is likely to destroy the autonomy of discovery so important for adolescents. And so those like Toni and Cida, with considerable experience in social movements and the ideological positions involved, need to use a delicate form of negotiation with newer groups such as this, to invite participation within a movement without offending the autonomy of the recent arrivals.

In this case the negotiation had at least an initial success. Cida stressed the similarity between their reaction to the congress of UMES and her own, emphasizing the need for a democratically structured exchange of experience and ideas to combat the weakening effects of isolation. Toni, who is more of a combative intellectual than a negotiator of consensus (both stances are needed at such meetings, and he and Cida make a good team in this respect)

began to recount the history of the student movement in Brazil. But when he noted that he was more and more talking in monologue to unresponsive faces, he shifted to a discussion of his experience in combating his expulsion from school (see footnote, pp10-11). One of his proposals for the Comissão Pro-Grêmio is the organization of a seminar for secundaristas on the legal aspects of grêmios, a need he is feeling due to the legal process he is mounting against his principal to try and gain re-admittance in the school. Such proposals had a ring of practicality for the students of São Mateus, who were feeling many of the same needs for information. Once they were convinced that the goal of this newly created commission was not to create another entity interested in carving out political hegemony, but was trying to address the hard questions they were all facing, they became receptive, even animated in discussing the possibilities of such a commission.

As of now, the commission remains on the level of possibility. School starts again in one month, and those secundaristas involved in coordinating the commission (by now the original 15 has dwindled down to three or four of the highly committed) have been drawing up lists of the schools where they have contacts, to initiate a series of visits similar to that in São Mateus. The seminar proposed by Toni is in the planning stages, scheduled for early March, and aided by the numerous contacts the group has within the Educational Movement and the PT. The group is hoping to use this seminar as a jumping off point for dialogue about the student movement. Two questions in particular need to be discussed: first, the need for a democratic structuring of the movement, in which all are invited to participate, and second, the more challenging question (and perhaps more dangerously seductive, since it tends to lead farther and farther from the immediate issues of education) - what role should the student movement play in the larger social struggle?

This second question has arisen already in the discussions about the bulletin the group is working to put out. This bulletin will serve as the presentation of the commission, discussing its origin, purpose, and its invitation for participation. The questions have to do with the commission's relationship to the Educational Movement of the Zona Leste, which has aided the secundaristas both in the production of the bulletin and in general discussions and support. At one meeting I attended, at which were present both the core group of secundaristas and the "old guard" of the educational movement, over half an hour was spent debating whether the bulletin should use the heading "Falta de Educação" (Lack of Education) which is the emblem of the movement. The students decided against it, since it had too much the flavor of a controlling entity. Better to preserve autonomy, they argued. This attitude was condemned by some as "anarchistic" (almost a curse among the movements here, since it is seen as denying the need for movements), but the secundaristas insisted that the reality of working with teenagers was such that they would be lost to the movement if they felt themselves swallowed by it. And so the title of the bulletin is simply "Grêmios Livres", with a slight acknowledgement of the "Movimento de Educação" typed in on the back.

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One of the reasons I find both cases so interesting is the role played by the adolescent desire for autonomy in the process of student organization. Teenagers have strong defenses against manipulation from above, which both helps and hinders them in learning personal expression within a larger social scheme. In Gregorio's case, the desire to do everything alone cut him off from whatever (little) support that might have been there to help him. On the other hand, in the case of the Comissão Pro-Grêmio, the rejection of paternalistic "assistance" sparked a group attempt to find a means of confronting common problems.

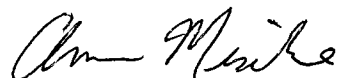
The negotiations of autonomy present in the student movement, in which the individual resists being swallowed by "the organization", point to a larger debate here about visions of social change, in particular those based in the ideas of socialism. It is becoming a rallying cry among the Brazilian left these days, "we need lots and lots of discussion about socialism." Like the Comissão Pro-Grêmio, which was seeking to shake free of the controlling attitude of the centralized student organizations, many of those who consider themselves "socialists" are disillusioned with the bureaucratic, repressive, and closed nature of today's socialist states. And within Brazil individuals and groups among the left have been undergoing a process of self-criticism, with several leaders of the popular or guerrilla movements of the 60's and 70's publishing analyses of the errors made during their opposition to the military, such as the romantization of the revolutionary readiness of the masses, the importation of foreign revolutionary models without looking closely enough at Brazil's reality, and the tendency to get stuck in intellectual back-rubbing while losing sight of the popular bases.

To add to the debate, the ideas of Paulo Freire (see AEM-1) have had a strong effect on the language used in Brazil to discuss social (and socialist) change, particularly Freire's rejection of the Leninist idea of an intellectual "vanguard" and his insistence that change must come from the progressive articulation and action of the people themselves. This is a step beyond a paternalistic ideology of the "masses" and toward a democratic interpretation of socialism dependent on decentralized community initiatives. The word for that here is "auto-gestão" (self-gestation), a vision of autonomous socialism which is beautiful in theory but practically a tough nut, as Gorbachev could tell us. "Socialism doesn't yet exist anywhere in the world today" has become another leftist commonplace, as well as the more extreme, "neither capitalism nor socialism as they now stand is the answer - we need to create something new." The truth in these statements is that the political and economic structures do not yet exist (if they are possible) which could integrate the traditional socialist goal of distributive justice through a planned economy, with space for autonomy, personal initiative, and democratic participation. This is at least one source of the perhaps creative ambiguity in the current leftist dialogue about social change.

Part of my fascination with adolescents lies in the fact that so many of these larger political questions are built into the emotional immediacy of the age. Cida and Gregorio were unwilling to have their personal visions swallowed by paternalistic control; and yet in order to have that vision survive, they needed to find a way to overcome isolation and look for support

from others. This negotiation between the personal and the social has as much to do with the passage to adulthood as, for example, with the attempt to locate individual initiative within a socialist scheme, or with the struggle of a developing nation to free itself from exploitation while maintaining its necessary links to the world. And with these rather grandiose analogies, I'll close this report.

Take care,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Am Mike".

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