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The days of May

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Dear Peter,

My agenda for 1988 begins on March 22. That was the day my head was so scattered between the various meetings I had scheduled, all scribbled in various corners of the tattered notebook I carried everywhere, that I was convinced of the need to systematize myself. I entered the nearest "papeleria" and bought an agreeable agenda. What had happened was that I had caught "meeting fever", a peculiar disease of the political militancy. In my attempt to understand the various dimensions of the left here, I was scheduling meeting on top of meeting, cross-currenting commitments, running from one side of the city to another (which is not easy in a city the size of São Paulo, with its complicated public/private and none-to-reliable bus system.) In some of these meetings I was a silent observer, in others a side commentator, and in others a central participant, such as the youth groups I work with on weekends. Peter suggested recently that I write about my "daily routine". My routine here has a sort of frenetic quality divided between meetings, busses, and the chance encounters that fall into my path.

One of the interesting things about my agenda is that it registers all of the "Day of the's" that are officially registered in Brazil. For example, March 23, the day after I initiated my agenda, was "Day of Meteorology". To my knowledge it passed unmentioned in the popular press. March 27 was "Day of the Theater", as well as "International Day of Youth", and April 2 was "International Day of the Children's Book". These few days that don't commemorate a group, profession or subject at least are "blessed" by some saint. Today, May 2, for example, is the Feast of Saint Atanasius. I personally have never heard of him, but I am sure there are Catholics who have.

I could continue with the list, but I'll stop here and isolate a few of the more controversial "Days" that Brazil is passing through right now. April 19, for example, was the Day of the Indian. I woke up to a radio broadcast giving a romantic history-in-poetry of the Indians in Brazil. Teachers of history organized exhibitions and there was much official talk about "preserving the national heritage of our indigenous peoples." But as developers move deeper and deeper into the Amazon region in search of minerals, timber, oil, and other products, the indigenous groups still existing are finding themselves displaced, if not massacred. Last March, 14 Indians were killed and 27 wounded in an ambush by the local whites in an Amazonian town on the Colombian border, part of an ongoing land dispute arising from the Brazilian government's slowness in marking the borders of

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the Indian reserve designated in 1986, and in paying indemnities to the whites of the region. A phrase circulating among the more critical points to the ironies of the day. "In the past, every day was the day of the Indian. Now it's only April 19."

The month of May has three "Days" of sizeable impact in the country. The first of these is May 1, International Workers' Day. Like most Americans, I had been programmed to think of the day in terms of parades of tanks in Red Square. I shocked some Brazilian friends because I didn't know that the day originated in the United States, when on May 1, 1886, 80 workers were killed in Chicago while protesting the violent repression of the strikes of that epoch. The day was adopted by the International Socialist Congress in 1889 and later adopted as a resolution of the Second International in 1893. Not surprisingly, the U.S. does not recognize the day, sticking to the much tamer picnics and parades of our Labor Day.

Here in Brazil the issue of strikes, repression, and "luta da classe" (class struggle) are still live wires pulling the country in contradictory directions, as was evident in this year's May 1 commemorations. Traveling by bus around the city last week, I noticed scores of banners wishing "Parabens!" (congratulations) to the workers, or promoting "Festas das trabalhadoras", principally in the poorer neighborhoods of the "periferia". Generally these banners were signed by local businesses and factories, which provided money for street parties with food, music, dancing, and sports competitions. In the populist days of president Getulio Vargas (1940-1954) as well as during the recent military period (1964-1984) it was the government that promoted such parties, the circus side of the Roman formula for keeping the workers content. In addition to staging elaborate shows and parades, Vargas used the day to "give" concessions to the workers (e.g. minimum wage, labor

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Márcia da Rocha, a popular radio announcer, gestures to the crowd at a May 1 rally in São Bernardo, the site of the re-awakening of the labor movement in 1978.



tribunals, state unions.) While presenting himself as the "protector of the workers" he was in fact nullifying the independent negotiating force of the unions. A great part of Vargas' state-centered labor legislation is still in effect today, although it is being challenged in the current Constitutional Assembly. It remains to be seen if the proposed labor reforms in the Constitution - such as the right to strike, to form independent unions, to job security and minimum wage - survive the final round of votation, especially given the conservative trend of the recent votes, which last week virtually killed land reform by prohibiting disappropriation of large land holdings.

When independent unions began to re-emerge in 1978 after years of military repression, union organizers began to reclaim May 1 as a "dia de luta" rather than a "dia de festa".\* I accompanied some friends to a rally in São Bernard, an industrial city within the metropolitan area of São Paulo, where in 1978 a huge strike of metal-workers began to re-mobilize the labor movement after years of military-enforced silence. This year's gathering of about 20,000 had its aspect of party, with stands selling beer and barbecue, popular musicians playing samba with political lyrics, groups of the left (unions, church groups, political parties, popular movements) selling T-shirts, buttons, and literature, and a "public opinion poll" as to people's preferences for president. But unlike the populist, paternalistic tone of the business sponsored street parties, this rally had a clear political message against the Sarney regime and "against the general suffocation", as announced in the posters advertising the event that had been plastered around the city.

The rally had been organized by CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores), one of the two centralized labor organizations that are debating the hegemony of the unions. The other is the CGT (Central Geral dos Trabalhadores). The difference between them is both ideological and operational. Working within a socialist ideology of class struggle, CUT insists on taking political positions on Brazil's current political and economic situation. This year's rally, for instance, was filled with banners and slogans advocating a reduction of President José Sarney's mandate to 4 years, "Direitas já!" (direct elections now), and non-payment of the external debt. Speakers denounced Sarney's proposal to cancel monthly salary readjustments and condemned control and exploitation by the IMF and foreign multi-nationals.

The CGT, on the other hand, attempts to keep out of "politics" and limits itself to what it calls "unionism of results", or in other words the strictly reivindicatory issues of salary, benefits, etc. The CGT is scorned by the left as the organization of the "pelegos", the word used to denounce these workers/organizers/managers who support the interests of the "patrão" (boss) rather than the "trabalhador". Adherents to CUT are likely to belong to the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores), although the CUT itself has no party affiliation and includes members of Brazil's various communist or socialist parties, as well as the left wings of the more established parties. Adherents to the CGT are likely to belong to the PMDB (Partido de Movimento Democrático Brasileiro), the centrist umbrella party that currently holds power both in the national legislature and in most state and local governments. According to a friend in the regional directorate of CUT, the CGT has a greater number of unions and associations affiliated (1,300 nationwide), but CUT has a wider popular base, with more workers affiliated in its member organizations, "and so it more or less evens out." This difference reflects CUT's commitment to an intensive and combative work among its bases, whereas the CGT works with a more centralized structure, more similar to the

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\* "day of struggle" rather than a "day of festivities"

U.S. model. In the São Paulo area, CUT has 27 unions and associations affiliated, and about 30 union "oppositions", internal chapters that oppose the directorship of unions affiliated with CGT.

Recently, the CGT and CUT tried to overcome their political differences in organizing a series of nationwide protests and paralyzations against Sarney's 3-month freeze in salary adjustments for "funcionários públicos" (public employees - see AEM-6). While they did succeed in pulling off a good number of local work stoppages as well as a national day of protest, the latter was considerably weakened by the difficulty of the two "centrals" in working together (such as, what was to be discussed at the podium - CUT's "Fura Sarney!" was turning the ground too political for the CGT.) CUT's continuing dream is that of a general strike paralyzing the country, something attempted last August with little success. Recently Jair Meneguelli, the president of CUT, has begun rediscussing that possibility, especially in relation to the general panic in the country caused by Sarney's proposal to extend the freeze in salary adjustments to all the workers in the country. But the dream of a general strike has evaporated again with Sarney's decision, after months of vacillation, to maintain the system of adjustments and look for other means of combating inflation. Sarney's decision was negotiated by the leaders of two of the most powerful unions in the country, that of the metal-workers and the electricians, both affiliated with the CGT. At the end of these negotiations the president of the electrician's union said, "Sarney's mandate can last for 100 years as long as he fills the pockets of the workers." This statement was denounced by "cutistas" as the epitome of depolitization, and much hissed at CUT's May 1st rally. It sums up not only the ideological difference between the two "centrals", but also a greater schism and debate right now among Brazil's social movements as to what it means to be "political".

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On May 8 Brazil, like the United States, celebrates Mother's Day. The stores have been announcing the day for nearly a month now, hanging banners or taking out ads scrawled in childish writing, "For the most beautiful mom in the world." I'm not sure to whom the ads are directed - to the kids, who are meant to buy the presents, or to the moms, who signal to the kids that they want to be treated like the moms in the ads. Aside from the commercialism, the day has a strong measure of respect, which I judge from the fact that even "militantes" of the left are reluctant to schedule meetings on that day. This was not true, incidentally, of the Easter holidays, which were freely agendized among the "petistas"\* I know. But on May 8, "it's no use scheduling, everyone will want to home with mom."

But there is another side to the "Dia das Maes", which has been picked up by women's groups and by CUT. One of the recently voted sections of the new constitution extends paid maternity leave from 90 days to 120 days. It also provides a revolutionary 8 days of paid paternity leave, a highly emotional measure that evoked both jokes and tears when it was voted in the Constitutional Assembly. The president of the Assembly, Ulysses Guimarães, allowed himself to express an ironic doubt as to the necessity of the day, since "the day of the father is nine months earlier than the day of the mother." He had to immediately retract the statement following a tearful and impassioned defense by the bill's author. Despite such residues of machismo, the bill ended up passing by a thunderous (and to my mind, surprising) majority.

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\* "petistas" are members of the PT



May 1 revindications of CUT: Out with Sarney, Direct Elections Now, Daycare for all, Fight always, Desist never - Union of Metal-workers

The 120 days maternity and 8 days paternity leaves were heavily lobbied by women's groups in the country. It remains to be seen if they survive the final round of amendments, since the associations of business and industry have come out strongly against the measures. Even before the Constitution has gone into effect the measures have had a negative impact on women's labor. Reports have come out even in the mainstream press about demands by employers for regular pregnancy tests of their woman workers, some even going as far as demanding certificates of sterility as a condition of hiring. Other firms and factories are significantly lowering the number of women, especially young women, whom they hire, or firing in mass the ones already working. A plastics factory close to my neighborhood forced the girls working there to sign an undated letter requesting dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy - to be used if they actually did become pregnant. Five girls refused to sign. They were fired. One who signed has since become pregnant - she was dismissed in accord with the letter. The plastics union, affiliated with CUT, went into action with a public protest that gained fair press coverage (even a television spot on Brazil's Sunday night equivalent of 60 Minutes - "Os Fantásticos".) But the press coverage seems to be turning public opinion against the 120 days maternity leave, which is seen as the threatening factor in these dismissals.

This is clearly not what the women's groups or the unions were wanting when lobbied for the measures. Right now they are trying to mobilize women (and men) to struggle to preserve their "conquests" in the Constitution. But the more common attitude of the people before the threats of employers is not to struggle, but to retreat. There has already been popular grumbling against the 8 days paternity leave, especially among women of the poorer classes who see it as a week for their husbands to sit around drinking pinga in the "botiquim" (local bar). "Imagine him helping around the house!" It is rare those who question the division of labor that leads them with double duty at work and at home, or the lack of day-care and pre-school that makes the situation of the woman worker even harder. Feminists argue that a new definition of family

is involved here, but it will be some time before the popular consciousness arrives at this point, and before the social infra-structure is in place to guarantee equal conditions of work for men and women.

Last month the Women's Commission of São Paulo organized a well-attended public protest in front of the building of FIESP (Federation of Industry and Business of São Paulo), which maintains its lobbying position against the 120 days. Another protest is scheduled for Mother's Day - only it will be held on May 6 rather than May 8 (since on May 8, "no one will show up.") Like CUT's May 1st rally, the purpose of the protest is to re-orient Mother's Day from a "Dia de festa" to a "Dia de luta". But Brazilians love a party, and it is often through parties that they are manipulated into silence.

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The third "Day" that takes place this month is another official party. May 13 is the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Brazil. On May 13, 1888, Princess Isabel signed the "Lei Áurea" a decree that liberated the slaves and put an end to slave-based sugar economy that was coming to an end in any case. The government has launched a full-fledged promotion of the day, complete with television spots and billboards about "black pride", signed by "Governor Sarney" or Governor Quéricia\*. The spirit of liberty, justice, and racial harmony has been thoroughly elagized in the official media. And as with the Day of the Indian, schools are organizing presentations about the "heritage of black culture" - samba, for instance, and macumba (the spiritist religion of African origin), and the revelry of carnival, which originated as the Brazilian slave's yearly escape in music and dance from the hardships of his life. The National Council of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) has declared as its 1988 "Campanha de Fraternidade (fraternity campaign, a yearly affair) the theme of solidarity and reflection about the struggle of blacks in Brazil. "Ouvi o clamor de meu povo" is the slogan on CNBB posters in every church, next to an upturned black face - "I heard the clamor of my people."

The hitch in the government and church "commemorations" of the liberation of the blacks is that the black community declares that there is nothing to commemorate. How can we celebrate freedom, they ask, when that freedom has not been achieved? To challenge the government propaganda about "100 years of abolition", groups of black consciousness have launched a poster and a campaign denouncing "100 years of lies." Brazil is the second largest black country in the world, after Nigeria, with blacks making up 40% to 70% of its population, depending on what counts as "black".\*\* It is hard to know this if you look at the predominantly white faces on television, magazines, advertising and other

\* Orestes Quéricia is currently governor of the state of São Paulo.

\*\* I attended one meeting of black teachers in which the following was used to illustrate the difficulty of telling who is "black" in Brazil's mixed racial culture. "If you ask these students who are black to raise their hands, you will get two or three in the class. If you ask who has a black parent or grandparent, nearly half the class will raise their hands. If you ask who knows of a black ancestor somewhere in the family, nearly everyone will be obliged to admit that they do." These "in between" black and white are officially designated as "pardos", although the movement of black consciousness is trying to finish with that term and urge people to assume their blackness, something very many people are unwilling to do.

expressions of the official media, although if you travel to the North or Northeast, the poorest regions of the country, the black majority becomes clear.

The great myth of race relations here is that "there is no racism in Brazil." Supposedly there exists a racial democracy in which whites, blacks, Indians, and today increasingly Asians, live harmoniously together, inter-mixing their blood and facing equal opportunities. To break this myth right from its starting place, associations of blacks have denounced the "Lei Áurea", which liberated the slaves, as "the most drastic expression of institutionalized racism in Brazilian society. It was racist and exclusionist, since it blocked the full integration of blacks into society, marginalizing them socially, culturally and intellectually."

According to their re-interpretation of official history, Princess Isabel's signature was merely the crowning of an abolitionist movement that had more to do with the interests of capitalism and the changing economic and social conditions than with respect for the humanity of the blacks. At the end of the last century Brazil was changing from a labor-intensive sugar and mineral based economy to a concentration on coffee production, less dependent on slave labor. England, the economic power of the time, was pressuring for abolition because it wanted to widen Brazil's consumer base for its goods. And at the same time, immigrants from Europe were beginning to arrive and coffee growers were seeing the benefit of free, salaried labor as opposed to the expensive upkeep of slaves. The slaves in turn were proving a serious nuisance, constantly running away to the "quilombos", hidden, barricaded communities of escaped blacks, living a life of resistance and self-sufficiency. And as the slaves were freed, but turned out into the streets without education, experience or resources. Meanwhile the government was pursuing a policy of financing the extensive immigration of Europeans, who were filling the positions of the ex-slaves. The result was the economic marginalization of blacks right from the beginning of abolition. They exchanged the "senzala" (slave quarters) for the favelas (shantytowns on the edges of large cities), which today have a heavy concentration of blacks.

Given this history, as well as the continued marginalization and violence experienced by blacks today, groups in the black community have declared May 13 a "Day of Denunciation and Reflection" rather than a day of celebration. They are launching a march and rally to counter the official ceremonies that will take place in the center of São Paulo on that day. A woman who works with the Organization of Black Teachers told me that there was a strong argument to have no movement at all on May 13, to let the day pass "em branco" (which in Portuguese as well as meaning "in blank" means "in white".) "Our day of celebration is not May 13, but November 20, the anniversary of the death of Zumbi, who defended the quilombo of Palmares for 17 years against the attempts of the whites to destroy it. We don't need to celebrate a false freedom "given" us by the whites. We have to celebrate our own force and our own resistance." After considerable debate, the groups of black consciousness decided they needed to use May 13 to educate people about November 20. "We have so little space to express ourselves that we have to use this space that has been given us. But we will use it in our own way, and not in a way that serves the interests of the dominant classes."

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Most schools have at least one or two teachers organizing some sort of activity to commemorate May 13. The day has had so much official publicity that it is hard for any semi-conscious teacher to miss the chance to include some current events in a curriculum that desperately needs enlivening. But in the *Colegia Santo Antônio de Pari*, in the North Zone of São Paulo, the principal made an express decision not to commemorate the day. His reasoning was not exactly the same as that of the black community, which claimed that the day was false and alerted people to a different day, November 20. Nelson, on the other hand, judged erroneous and paternalistic the whole Brazilian institution of naming "Days" to commemorate groups or events. One of the teachers had come to him with a proposal to organize a theater presentation about abolition, in which the kids would learn short speeches to recite in turn. Nelson, who is new this year as director of the school, refused. The teacher protested that this project is something she does every year. She tracked him down in the hallways for several days, trying to persuade him of the "richness" of the experience. But Nelson remained firm in his position that the question of blacks in Brazil, like the question of Indians, women, workers, etc., is a full-time question of considerable depth, and that singling out "Days" to deal with these was teaching the kids a false, easy way of symbolizing problems without taking responsibility for addressing them.

Nelson did initiate a different kind of activity in the school, which without any explicit reference to May 13 thrust the kids into the middle of the question of racism. He arranged to take all of the second and third year students (equivalent of juniors and seniors) to a showing of the movie "Cry Freedom", which is currently playing in São Paulo under the title, "Um Grito de Liberdade". "Cry Freedom" is the Richard Attenborough film about the relationship between Steven Biko, the black South African activist eventually killed in prison, and Donald Woods, a white South African journalist who befriends Biko and discovers the reality of black South Africa. The film has been received in Brazil with considerable publicity, arriving just in time to be included in the debate about racism and abolition in Brazil.

Nelson's plan was to take the kids to see the film and then arrange for several days of reflection, in which the kids would be liberated from classes to discuss the film. To aid in the discussion he invited Frei Alamir, a Franciscan brother who works with the Justice and Peace Commission of the Faculty of São Francisco, and Elvira, a black woman who works with São Paulo's "Grupo de União e Consciência Negra". I happened to be working together with Nelson in a project for a class we are both taking at PUC (Catholic University), when he told me about the project. Curious to see where the kids' reflections would go, I invited myself to participate as well.

The *Colegia Santo Antônio de Pari* is the first private school that I have visited. Like most private schools, it serves mostly middle to upper class kids, although this year Nelson has initiated an ambitious scholarship program, trying to reach a count of 20% scholarship students from poorer families. Like a mirror of social relationships in Brazil, the school is also extremely white. You see a few "pardos" (mixtures of various shades) as well as Japanese and Koreans, but very few of what can clearly be called "black". In the high school, out of about 200 kids only 3 are black. These three students were to have an important role in the discussions that developed.

There were no blacks at all in the class that participated in the first day's discussion. About 50 third year students arranged their desk-chairs in a large circle, with Frei Alamir, Elvira and I distributed around the ring. Frei opened by presenting the day's procedure, which he and Nelson had planned



in order to ensure that the ideas and proposals would come from the kids, with the minimum of direction from the adults present. First we would break into smaller groups to "re-see" (re-see) the film, discussing the scenes and themes that were most striking. The groups would then return to the large group to further the debate. After a break, we would return to the smaller groups to discuss the question of racism in Brazil, as well as the question "what is my role in this, and what can I do?" The kids were attentive, but a bit hushed. They were still a bit dubious as to the value or purpose of the project, but in any case it was interesting to be doing something different for a change.

I joined one of the groups while it was still in the stage of "what are we supposed to be doing?" Slowly the kids loosened up as they began remembering the film, which for the most part had impressed them. It soon became clear how little they knew about South Africa. Most weren't even aware that South Africa was a country. The country was Africa, right? and South Africa was the southern part of that country. Apartheid was completely new to them. In fact in the next day's session it was the two black girls who raised the question to me, "what is apartheid?" What they could identify with, however, was the opening scene of the invasion and destruction of the black shanty-town. Police destruction of favelas is a common experience in Brazil. If these kids had not experienced a "despeje" first-hand, they had seen it scores of times in the news.

This at least was the justification given by my group as to why the scene of the destruction of the shanty-town was slightly less shocking than that of the massacre of the students at Soweto, "who were just using their right to their own opinions." These two scenes were repeatedly the first mentioned in terms of shock quality, since for these very sheltered kids<sup>shock</sup> was the first reaction to the film. Referring to the moment in the Soweto massacre in which the official takes out a pistol and shoots a child as he passes in his car, one student exclaimed "it's hard to believe people can be as cruel as that!"

Their expressions of basic indignation and revolt extended to the way blacks were treated like animals. They remembered the scene in which Donald Waid's black maid was called a "female Bantu" by the police, and the way Bika was tortured to the point of fatal injury in prison. But they tended to treat these as a kind of "negligence" (their word) rather than systematic oppression. "Why didn't anyone do anything? Why don't they treat them like human beings?"

The kids were impressed by Bika's presence in the courtroom defending black consciousness for just this reason - he insisted on presenting himself as a human being. As adolescents do, they admired his cleverness in answering the questions of his examiners. "Jogue a venena contra a cobra" (he threw the poison back to the snake.) They especially liked the moment in which the examiner asks Bika, "Why do you call yourselves black? You people are more brown than black." Bika shoots back, "Why do you call yourselves white? You people are more pink than white." Besides affirming the basic humanness of skin color, it touches on a question of special resonance in Brazil, where the degree of miscegenation - mixtures of white, black, and Indian - is so great that no one can claim racial "purity". Thus the contradiction of an extreme attentiveness to shades of black and white, while at the same time the denial that these differences have any importance.

The kids were quick to pick up on the extreme divisions between rich and poor that went with the division black/white. This is clearly evident in Brazil, although not with the same absoluteness as in South Africa. But what interested

them was the difference in family relationships that went with the rich/poor black/white division. The white family of Donald Woods, they noted, was a closed unit, while the family of the blacks included everyone in the community. They were impressed by the unity at Biko's funeral. "Imagine rich whites with that kind of unity!" "When you have money, you are isolated. When you are poor, you have unity because you have nothing else to get in the way." One of the girls went on to make a comparison with her "best-friendship" with the girl at her side. "If we separate, I know it will be over a question of money. Nothing else could divide us."

The question of the accommodation of the whites to the situation touched them strongly, also because of their own experience. They noted that Wendy, Donald Woods's wife, only resolved to act when she had been personally touched by the violence, with the "gift" of the chemically treated T-shirts to her children. "Most people are accommodated. They won't do anything," reacted one girl, referring to the scene in which the officials arresting Woods say they can't get involved in controversy because they have children to take care of. "Most of us would do the same thing in that position," she sang out bravely, since most Brazilians readily accuse others of accommodation, but few assume it themselves. "The problem is our own egotism. No one risks himself to think of the other. It's sad, but it's true of almost all of us here. No one here can deny it."

This was a challenge that almost no one, at least in that first class, was ready to take up. The group remained silent for a few minutes, until Frei Almirante tried to animate them by throwing the question to Elvira. "How did you, as a black person, feel watching this film?" The kids perked up. This was the foreignness of experience that always has its fascination. Elvira said she had been moved to tears by parts of the film, but that she didn't think it showed the reality of the black people in South Africa. It was presented from the point of view of the whites, and really did not express the life, the farce, and the unity of the black community. "You have to ask, who was making this film, and with what interests? Why, for example, was the Woods family's escape the most dramatic moment of the film, rather than the situation inside South Africa?"

The kids themselves seemed to be intuitively aware of this criticism of the film, although the principle of judging a film politically was far from most of them. Only one group in the three days of reflection mentioned the escape scene as the "most striking". They tended to brush it aside, recognizing its over-dramatic weakness in comparison to the view inside Africa. But the film was after all aimed at white audiences, and despite its weaknesses and its simplified dramatic presentation of right and wrong, it succeeded for these kids in arousing revolt and empathy at the discovery of a foreign reality.

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The discussion became more heated when that reality was brought home to Brazil. Frei Almirante presented the next point of discussion, "Could it be that the same situation of racism exists in Brazil?" This question hit a nerve, which began with Brazil in general and ended up reaching into the race relations within the school itself.

The groups I sat in on started out divided on the question. "I don't think we have racism here, everyone gets along with everyone else. What do you think?" began one girl a bit dubiously, throwing the question to the others to settle.

This particular group was all white. One of the more articulate boys rescued the group from its hesitation with the argument, "It's more a question of class than of race. People have prejudice against the poor, and since most blacks are poor, they are discriminated against. But it's not really racism." The others nodded at this much-used argument, which seems to relieve the question but in reality hides another, "why is it that most blacks are poor?"

I raised this question to the kids, and they discussed it for a while, analysing the concentration of blacks in favelas, the high unemployment, the predominant stereotypes of blacks as dishonest, thieving, marginal. They remembered the common jokes, "Bad driver, He must be black." They were slowly arriving at a consensus that racism did exist, although their sense of history was not well enough developed to analyze its origins. But what really caught them was the inevitable (and in a certain sense, more superficial) question raised by one of the girls. "Blacks as friends are fine, but would you marry one?" It was with this ancient dilemma that they felt the limits to their own broad-mindedness. Some of the girls protested indignantly that they would marry whomever they liked. Others said, "It's not me, but my family that would have a problem." Others admitted that they would not "feel right". For men the tradition is different. There is a well-worn joke here, "Não gosto de negros, são gosto de negras" (I don't like black (men), I just like black (women)!) Add to this, "but not to marry". The "joke" captures the dual of racial and sexual exploitation, responsible not only for Brazil's mixed racial heritage, but also the machismo that exploits one class of women while isolating the other in a repressive purity.

In another group a girl made a fierce defense of her view that in Brazil there is prejudice, but not racism. Her classmates, discarding, tried to pin her down on the difference. "Racism is stranger, more violent. In South Africa they have racism. But here they just have prejudice. I might be prejudiced, but I'm not racist."

Here Elvira entered again. "The difference between the violence in South Africa and in Brazil is that there the violence is physical. Here, it is more psychological. But it is violence just the same. Try to imagine what its like if everyone you see on television, and all the important people in government and business, are white, unless it is someone committing a crime or being shot by police. And when everything beautiful and pure is white, and everything bad and ugly, is black. My father told me to sleep with my finger in my nose, so it wouldn't be so ugly. Think of what that does to your self-image. You end up carrying all of this revolt inside yourself."

Elvira pushed them further. "Who knows that you don't have this sort of violence here among yourselves? I'd like to hear from the black students to see what their experience has been." This was the class with three black students, two girls, who kept mostly to themselves, and one well-dressed boy who kept up a steady stream of jovialities in relation to the other students. When I spoke to him later during recess he claimed he had never experienced racism, "maybe because my family has money". He had gone to private schools all his life and had worked out his balance with the white students.

The more interesting discussion came in relation to the two girls, Alexandra and Rasana. Both girls had had repeated experiences of racism in the two years they had been in the school. On Alexandra's first day a boy had been playing around with notebooks. He picked up hers, realized whose it was, and dropped it, saying he didn't want to be contaminated. Rasana spoke of the various times she had been accused of thievery. "Whenever something disappears, everyone turns to us first."

Elvira asked the group, "Did any of you know of this?" Blank, hushed faces. In the case of both girls the incidents had involved high level meetings of parents and administrators, but it was hushed up in front of the students. "When you ask if there is racism in Brazil, think of what is going on in front of you without you seeing it."

Several students in the class turned on the defensive. "But why do they stay so isolated? They should mix with us, talk with us. If there is a problem, they should present it to us openly!"

Her point was taken up by others in the class. Clearly, the girls' isolation had been noted and commented on before, but never discussed openly. There was a sort of explosion as the kids insisted that the girls should seek them out, anxious to show that it was not they who were racist. "It seems that they are prejudiced against us!"

The two girls were hushed before the tumult. Elvira asked, "Did you ever ask yourselves why they stay so isolated? Look at what is happening right now. All if you are falling in top of them, without giving them a chance to speak. Think of having to live with that threatening force everyday! Isolation is a mechanism of defense, of inner revolt, not of prejudice."

The students remained defensive, but with some monitoring by Elvira gave the girls a chance to speak. As they articulated their sense of exclusion, there was a sort of charge in the room. Something had been opened that would be impossible to reclose. The girls had been given voice, the others had had their unconscious racism exposed in the act. Emotions were high, and one wanted to leave when the period finished. Alexandra and Rasana ended up leaving together with a cluster of the students who had been the most defensive, still in lively, questioning discussion. The matter was not resolved, but the veil had been torn away, and in some way or another the students would have to confront the new relationships arising from the discussion.

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The final question that Frei Almirante asked the kids to consider was "what is my role in this, and what can I do?" The discussion focused around a requirement Nelson had placed in the project, that each student write a letter to the South African government expressing an opinion about that country's racial situation. The proposal was viewed with a considerable lack of enthusiasm by most of the kids. One girl expressed her doubts about the letter - "I think the idea is beautiful. If I have to I'll write the letter with all my heart, but what good will it do? Will it change anything?"

In discussing the letter, the third day's group became particularly weighted down with the spirit of "não adianta"\*. These two words are repeated in Brazil like a drumbeat accompanying any proposal of social action. Will the letter get there, they wanted to know. And if it gets there, who will read it? Will a government that kills 700 students at one blow be interested in the opinions of a bunch of students in Brazil? And shouldn't we be trying to eliminate the racism inside ourselves before we think of South Africa?

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\* "adiantar" means "to move forward." Thus "não adianta" means "it won't move it forward", or more colloquially, "it won't do any good".



Scenes from May 13 - "National Day of Protest and Denunciation of Racism in Brazil."

One of the small groups reached the conclusion that "alone we can't do anything, but in a group we can. What is needed is unity. They should unite all the power in the world to confront their problems. Before they have unity, we can't do anything. We just have to wait and see what happens as time passes."

I decided to challenge them at this point, since they were beginning to rest too easily in the various justifications of "nãe adianta". Does this "unity", I asked, fall from the sky? Is it something "out there" that "they" create magically? Or is it something that we build, beginning with ourselves? They looked at me dubiously. But "nãe adianta!" they began to clamor again.

I asked them to analyze these two words, "nãe adianta". What does it mean to "adiantar"? "Resilver" responded one boy immediately, falling into the trap of swollen expectation that leads to easy frustration. No, I pointed out. "Adiantar" means to take forward, but not to resolve. Maybe the letter wasn't "resilver" the problem of apartheid in South Africa. But could it at least take the struggle forward, building this unity at least in our own consciousness?

They were silent for a moment. "But that's the problem," spoke up a girl. "The letter will show that the film made us more sensitive to the problem, but what will it change?" Up against the real limits of the letter, but feeling the necessity of doing something, they felt themselves to be at an impasse.

Two alternative proposals finally broke through the impasse. One group of girls proposed that the class write letters to President Sarney rather than the South African government, since the point had been made that Brazil is one of two Latin American countries that have refused to break relations with South Africa after a direct appeal by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The idea was received with more enthusiasm. At least it was closer to home, with less chance that the letters would end up in the wastebasket. Another boy proposed that they write letters to the leaders of the black movement in South Africa. The chorus began again, "nãe adianta!" But here Elvira entered to ask them to imagine the loneliness and isolation of the struggle, the need for expressions of solidarity. The kids were impressed, and it was this plan that they eventually resolved upon. "At least we will be showing that while the government of Brazil supports the South African government, the people don't accept it."

Toward the end of this discussion the chemistry teacher stuck her head in the door to inform the class that she had conferred with Nelson and the class would indeed have its chemistry test the next day, despite their protests that they needed an extra day to study. The kids' faces fell, and from that point on it was hard to keep them focused on South Africa. The question of chemistry kept bubbling to the surface. The teacher didn't give them space or freedom to complain, they complained. She presented the material way above their heads and expected them to reach her level. She was failing most of the class without them being able to do anything. "It's like apartheid!" one boy exclaimed. "The teachers think they are superior to the students, the students are discriminated against, and we can't even protest!" Everyone nodded. By means of their chemistry test they had discovered their strangest identification with South Africa.

"Why don't you do something about it?" Frei Alamirã asked. "Nãe adianta," they began. "It's she that has to come talk to us, not we who have to talk to her." Once again they argued the paternalistic ideology of waiting for change to be given them. And since before the arrival of Nelson the school had been genuinely repressive, they were fearful of reprisal. It was only this year that Nelson was opening spaces, and they didn't yet believe in the possibility of dialogue.



But all the previous talk about action and "taking forward" had its effects. Suddenly the kids seized upon the idea, "why dan't we de anything?" The suggestions came flying - present a petition protesting the attitude of the teacher, refuse to take the test, stage a strike in the school. Here was a concrete experience of "oppression" in which they felt the possibility of action, and the first impulse was toward radicality. But the experience was new and the confusion was high. "What should we de?" they turned to us, as I along with Elvira and Frei Almir were pushing the idea that they should de something. "It's you who have to answer that," I told them. "Just make it something intelligent, with arguments in hand."

The kids left the class in an animated cluster, and eventually ended up forming a commission to speak with Nelson and register their complaints. Nelson was overjoyed, although he didn't say this to the kids, and in fact took a fairly critical line with them - "You've waited until the eve of the test to tell me this?" Despite their protests he insisted that they take the tests, "to give me more facts in hand", while he promised to discuss methodology with the chemistry teacher. Later he told me, "This was what I was hoping would come out of this project, that the kids would start to struggle for what they want. These kids are accustomed to be given everything. If we give them freedom as easily as they have been given material opportunities, it will be a soft, unresponsible freedom. They have to win their freedom with sweat, with struggle and commitment. In my opinion that's what a school has to teach."

Earlier one of the girls had echoed Nelson's evaluation, offering an explanation of why many rich or middle class kids feel the need to involve themselves in politics. "Our parents are accommodated, they present everything to us as a sea of roses. This imprisons us. Many times we don't see the world, don't see what exists. I think this film helped many of us see what really is, since we talk, but don't know what we are saying. What we need is to create an ideal, to begin to fight in favor of something. Because we don't have an ideal. The fault is more with us than with our parents, since we ourselves have to act."

At the end of the encounter, Elvira invited the kids to visit the site of the "Grupo de União e Consciência Negra", where she works. There was a strong interest on the part of many students, especially in the class that had experienced the confrontation over internal racism. Two of the white girls who had been the most defensive got together with Alexandra and Rasana to organize the trip to Elvira's group. They invited me to go along as well. As of yet the trip has not materialized, due to tests at the school and other distracting events. But the letters to the South African black leaders were written. Although I didn't have the chance to read them, Nelson was enthusiastic about the strength and liveliness that emerged in the letters. The kids are translating them into English as the final step (also an attempt to integrate various school subjects into the project). Whether there will be a further continuity to the project I don't know. There was talk of organizing a joint assembly of all the classes to discuss these issues further, or of requesting more films or books on the subject. Nelson's position is that the initiative now has to come from the kids. The first step had been taken, and many nerves had been touched. But the difficulty in Brazil is to move on the second step, and the third. The tradition of inaction still weighs heavily here, with the "nãe adianta" in constant struggle with the "vamos fazer"\*.

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\* "let's do it."



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As I am typing the final draft of this newsletter, the days of May are coming to a close. The Women's Commission and the black community have staged their protests, and are now trying not to lose the space that was conquered in their respective "Days". The Constitutional Assembly is nearing its final votes, with the decision on Sarney's mandate scheduled for this week or the week after (probably the latter, given the turtle's pace of this constitutional process.) Soon we will have an end to the suspense as to whether there will or will not be elections in November of this year. Soon also we will know if Sílvia Santos, millionaire businessman and popular television host, will run for mayor of São Paulo. Jânio Quadros, the current mayor, has raised bus fares once again (they have risen 400% since my arrival), but this time I noted a fall in the expressions of popular indignation - resignation is hardening. And the IMF is in Brasília, negotiating an accord with Sarney's fourth finance minister, Mairon de Nêriega, who has to find yet another way of controlling government spending.

These at least are the headlines as São Paulo moves into the rains and winds of winter. In the "periferia" the favela kids I work with are getting ready for kite season. It is tempting to join them, to scribble the words "não adianta" on a kite and watch it sail away into the wind. Only you still have the string to pull it back. Even kite-flying is not an escape. There is no escape, as the kids of the Cilegia Santa Antônia de Pari argued to me during a recess discussion. There is only a continuing process of confrontation.

Um abraço,

*Am Muxto*

Received in Hanover 5/27/88

