

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Rua General Bagnuolo, 1026/06
Vila Prudente
São Paulo, SP 03153

AEM-9

Becoming Political

July, 1988

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Dear Peter,

"Partidarismo não!" With these chants a student rally ended in confusion and heated argument. The rally had been organized to pressure for democratization in the schools, a theme that succeeded in pulling nearly 1000 teenagers out of night classes in 10 schools of the Vila Prudente (Zona Leste of São Paulo). The students wanted the right to organize grêmios livres, free student organizations, without the interference of school administrators. The objectives were clear enough, although those who read my newsletter on grêmios (AEM-4) will remember the confusion about just what a grêmio is and can do.

The confusion at this rally was not about the grêmios themselves, but about the political groups in defense of them. Most of the students, new at such political happenings, were taken aback by what seemed to be a swarm of representatives from various political entities pushing their way into the rally. Neighborhood militants of the PT were passing out bulletins proclaiming, "the PT supports the struggle of the students." Local organizers of CUT had unfurled their banners in the crowd. Representatives from the PCdoB were requesting to speak from the podium. And when the student organizer who was leading the rally thanked the PT for the use of the carro de som (loudspeakers mounted on a truck, serving as a podium), a large number of students joined in the shouting against partidarismo (party partisanship), although ironically I later found out that the leader of the chants was a militant of the PMDB.*

My purpose in describing this incident is not to dissect the political groups acting within and upon the student movement (I've done that elsewhere - see AEM-4) but rather to examine a question that has been emerging again and again in my discussion with youth of various sectors. What does it mean to "be political"? In my last letter I explored this question in relation to kids involved in church youth groups. Here I'd like to push the question further in relation to kids involved in the student movement and political parties.

In my last newsletter I noted that the most common association with the word "political" is that of political parties, elections, politicians, etc., all of which are tainted in the popular mind with opportunism, commercialism, power struggles and corruption. Politics is something respectable people avoid. But when youth begin actively to enter the political sphere they soon encounter the

* See the list at the end of this newsletter for an explanation of all of the organizations referred to within.

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credo that "everything is political". The choices one makes in one's daily life cannot be separated from the world "out there"; every act has political implications. If the kids bear with this responsibility and decide to extend their idealism and their militancy into what is known as the "intermediate institutions" - such as political parties, unions, neighborhood organizations, they soon come across another usage of the word "political". "So and so is completely unpolitical," they hear. Or, "we need to make this electoral process (or this social movement, or this union negotiation) more political." The assumption here is that some situations can be judged more or less political than others. By extension, the youth discovers that it isn't enough just to "be" political - it is necessary to "become" political as well.

But this conscious process of becoming political is not clear or easy, given the tangle of ideologies and institutions on the Brazilian political scene. One source of the difficulty lies in the complicated nature of institutional involvement. Youth enter organizations such as political parties because of a more or less vaguely defined desire to change the world. They understand only ingenuously that in one way or another the goal of an institution such as a political party is to gain access to power. In my last letter I described a distinction made within the church youth ministry between "politics" and "political practice". Politics is simply everything to do with human relations (hence, everything is political), while political practice is organized action to gain or maintain power - the sphere of parties, unions, professional or popular organizations of all types.

When people judge such institutions to be "more" or "less" political, they are usually evaluating the extent to which these institutions are out for power for power's sake, or to what extent they are selflessly committed to a given vision of social transformation. This is not a simple thing to evaluate (and perhaps the distinction itself is an adolescent either/or). For example, what exactly is meant by "social transformation"? Everyone is in favor of it, and everyone can find a way to defend that their particular political practice is aiming towards it. But if ideological correctness and political purity are complicated to evaluate, there exist some points of reference to understand why the concern about the degree of "politization" exists. Take, for example, the social movements of the periferia. Generally they exist because of some concrete social necessity - the absence of health care facilities, for example, or the wretched physical conditions of the schools, or the desire of those living in the favelas to live in a real house. These movements have their own dynamic of consciousness-raising and organization. But especially around election time, politicians of every political orientation tend to swarm around these movements, "hitch-hiking", so to speak, so as to gain credit and votes. After the elections they mostly disappear. This sort of opportunistic political practice is what is known as "depoliticized" among those who think they know and act better. It accounts for the deep suspicion with which those in the popular movements view politicians and political parties. The result of this suspicion is the insistence that the movements stay "apartisan" - united simply over the specific questions involved, such as obtaining land, or improving the schools, rather than united over a particular party's program for the transformation of Brazil.

The problem is that the meaning of the term "apartisan" is subject to radically different interpretations. To return to the student movement and the rally mentioned earlier, everyone involved would agree that the student movement has to stay partisan. The confusion at the rally resulted from a clash between the various interpretations of that term. To give some background, the rally was the result of a series of meetings between students, teachers, and parents of the

region, about the difficulties they were experiencing in formation of the various participatory organs of the schools, which in addition to the grêmios include the newly established "school councils", composed of parents, teachers, students, and school administrators. The meetings did not spring from the initiative of any one political party, but rather from a common need for strategies to confront the resistance of school administrators. During the several organizing meetings that I attended the participants had discussed the possibility of the rally being "coopted" by the student leaders of the UJS (União de Juventude Socialista), the student organ of the PCdoB. The students of UJS currently have control of the legally recognized student organizations, UMES, UPES, and UBES, and it is a source of contention within the student movement that they are largely concerned with gaining quadros (blocks of influence) for the party. To let the students of UJS speak would derail the rally from the main track of calling for grêmios and democratization in the schools, and turn the rally into a slightly disguised podium for the program of the PCdoB. To avoid this, the organizers decided to designate the speakers ahead of time to make sure they kept within the educational issues involved, and exclude others who might appear at the last minute wanting to speak. The purpose of the exclusion was to avoid partidarismo.

The problem arose because many, although not all, of the organizers of the rally were "petistas" (members of the PT), and it was from the PT that they managed to borrow the sound-amplifying equipment for the rally. When the local PT arrived and began passing out pamphlets, many students in the crowd (most of whom were participating in their first political rally) began grumbling about the presence of political parties. Their disquietude was re-inforced by the visible exclusion of the students of UJS who wanted to speak, which made it appear that the organizers were trying to maintain a monopoly for the PT. It was then that the hidden militant of the PMDB was able to whip up the chants of "partidarismo não!" Among the students with little political experience, the slogan caught fire because of the bad name political parties in general have in Brazilian society. No one, least of all adolescents just starting out in political militancy, wants to feel like a pawn of someone else's opportunism.

To understand the confusion involved, we have to sort out at least three different understandings of the term "apartisan" that were at work among the students in the crowd. The first, which is probably held by most kids in the schools, is an equation of "apartisan" with "apolitical". It is based on the idea that politics is for the politicians, associated with ambition and corruption and other dirty affairs. As I described in my last letter, this understanding leads to the assertion that politics does not belong in school, in church, in the workplace. The result of the separation of politics from school life is that the schools are stripped of any political debate that might challenge the powers that be. The military government pushed heavily this idea of apartidarismo in the few student organizations it authorized, and this attitude still persists among the great majority of school administrators. When these administrators say that the grêmios have to stay "apartisan", they mean that the students should stick to organizing dances and sports competitions and theater presentations, and keep away from more combative debate and criticism of society or the functioning of the school. This definition of "apartisan" has a wide appeal among a large portion of the kids as well, the majority of which have swallowed the officially promoted dislocation of politics from daily life.

The second understanding of "apartisan" is actually a mask for partisan manipulation. Remember that it was the militant of the PMDB who began the chants of "partidarismo não". While I can't prove this, it seems likely to me that the student's goal was to discredit the PT in the eyes of the students, thereby gaining

space for the more moderate student leaders of the PMDB and other centrist parties. A similar strategy was explicitly described to me at a student conference I attended on the subject of grêmios, organized by the state department of education. Along with the rest of the state government organs, the department is controlled by members of the PMDB, Governor Quércia's party, who were appointed at the beginning of Quércia's term in 1987. The teachers from the department who directed the student discussion groups pushed heavily the idea that the grêmios had to stay apartisan.

Later I had the chance to speak with a group of six or seven of the conference organizers, all of them department employees.* When I raised the question of why the conference was promoting so heavily apartidarismo, I caught the organizers in an interesting divergence of opinion. Most of them defended the idea that the grêmios should not be used to promote the interests of any political party. They were concerned, they told me, that most of the the students attempting to organize grêmios in the schools were militants of the PT or the PCdoB; the goal of the conference was to rescue to grêmios from the hands of these "agitators" and provide stimulus and leadership training for that more moderate layer of students whose political consciousness had not yet been formed.

But while the conference organizers admitted the goal of preventing a monopoly of the grêmios by the more leftist parties, most denied, when I pressed them, that they wanted to maintain the grêmios for the PMDB (or the PSDB, a newly formed splinter of the PMDB to which most of this group belonged). One man in the group, a leader of the new PSDB, disagreed with these denials. "I think we have to be honest here. Of course grêmios are used by the political parties, of the left and the right. We have to know how to use the grêmios to form the young leadership of the novo partido."

What this amounts to is a use of the concept of apartidarismo to support the interests of one party or political sector of society. The strategy works among the politically inexperienced, as I've already noted, because of the general state of discredit of parties and politicians. It is not just the moderate or conservative forces that use this strategy. I've already referred to the manipulation of the student movement by the PCdoB. The students involved in the Union of Socialist Youth (UJS), who officially "direct" the student movement, never openly declare that they are members of the PCdoB, and along with everyone else declare that the grêmios should be apartisan. But in practice their strategy is to place their members in the leadership of as many of them as possible, or to attract the existing leaderships little by little to the PCdoB. This is the strategy known as "forming quadros" (blocks of influence), denounced by many outside of the party as "depoliticized", since it is concerned principally with establishing power bases for the party. Of course the members of the PCdoB would never admit that they are

* Ironically, no students were involved in the planning of the conference, although its stated purpose was to help students organize themselves. When I questioned the lack of student participation, I was told by the conference organizers that "students want to participate, but really they have nothing to contribute." The paternalism and manipulation implied in this attitude extended to other areas of the conference. Many student militants complained that the conference had been convoked at the last possible moment, with the stipulation that principals choose one student from each school. As a result, many of the most active (and politically militant) of the student organizers, who often have less than amicable relations with school principals, only heard about the conference after it was over. These students accused the department of trying in this way to organize grêmios that would be easier to control.

"just" out to gain quadros. Here we see how the concept of what is or isn't political becomes relative. Social transformation, according to the political vision of the PCdoB and other vanguardist groups, requires the struggle to gain control of as many entities of civil society as possible, as strategic points from which to launch the revolution, which proceeds according to pre-determined stages. Their political practice, in accord with this vision, is to gain (or co-opt, according to some) adherents to their already-formed analysis of society.

The problem is that the manipulation involved is easily discernible to the rank and file of student organizers in the schools, including those with little involvement in political parties. I described in AEM-4 the disillusionment experienced by many students who attended the national congress of UBES, the national student union whose leadership is controlled by students of the UJS. In accord with the general political practice of the PCdoB, all of the resolutions of the congress were pre-determined from the top, and all that was left was the fight for control of the directorship. The educational concerns of the student organizers in the schools, such as repression, poor teaching, and the day-to-day difficulties of organizing grêmios, were all but forgotten. Most students never even had the chance to speak, and found themselves watching a polemical power struggle that alienated and disgusted them. The result was a general disillusionment with the role of the political parties in the student movement. When those students at the rally who had seen the methods used by the PCdoB at the congress joined in the shouts of "partidarismo não", they were unmasking a very negative experience of manipulation by political parties, which had soured them on parties in general.

The third understanding of what it means for a social movement to be *apartisan* does not deny the legitimate function of political parties, but neither does it try to "gain" the movements for the parties. This is the position of most of the student leaders I know who are also active in the PT. Unlike students of the PCdoB, who mask their connection to the party, *petistas* admit openly their party affiliation. They insist that there is a role for political parties in promoting social change, and actively combat the idea that party politics is ugly. But they recognize that the student movement has to stay autonomous from the party. Their goal is not to fill the grêmio with militants of the PT, nor to use the student movement to promote the political program of the PT to the exclusion of other views. They promote the formation of grêmios as autonomous student forums for strong and open debate by all the political factions, with the right to discuss social issues beginning with the problems of the schools and moving out into other areas of political questioning. As opposed to the point of view that says "*apartisan*" means staying out of politics, this third interpretation of "*apartisan*" maintains that the organization of the grêmio is already a political act, and as a tool to democratize the schools, the grêmio has to confront the controversial issues of power relations in and out of the school. Everyone has a right to voice and vote, even those with little political experience. The grêmio then becomes a forum for reflection and learning, for *concientization*, rather than a jumping-off point for a pre-determined revolution.

This emphasis on learning is one point that makes the PT qualitatively different from other parties of the left that follow the classic marxist-leninist orientation. In a recent collection of essays published by the PT entitled Education as an Act of Party Politics, the prominent educational theorist Carlos Rodrigues Brandão writes, "There is a pedagogic task in a political party. Without being scholastic, it educates. It is an instrument of struggle for power, and also an instrument of education of its militants . . . In its struggle it *concientizes*, gives people and groups the capacity for political action . . ."

Paulo Freire, the educational and political theorist whose ideas I have discussed in previous newsletters (AEM-1), cautions in another essay of the collection that the educational process of the party has to be two-sided affair. "The PT cannot be the educator that already knows it all, that already has an untouchable truth, in the face of the incompetent popular masses to be guided and saved . . . in order for the PT to assume its role of "party as educator" coherently with its proclaimed options, it must also assume the role of learner from the popular masses. Its formative task is found in the interior of the popular struggles, in the intimacy of the social movements from which it came, from which it cannot remove itself and with which it should always be learning."

The PT emphasizes that political consciousness is constantly in the process of formation, through open debate and dialogue within the movements (which maintain their autonomy from the party) and on every internal level of the party. This makes the experience of "becoming political" different for student leaders in the PT than for those in other parties in which the structure is less democratic and the ideological formation is more rigid. I've noted that simply to discuss politics with student militants of the PT is very different from discussing it with those of the PCdoB, for example. With petistas I feel I'm talking with people in the process of learning about politics, with discoveries, confusions, uncertainties, reverses of opinion, passionate disagreements and debates. Always the person is there struggling with the ideology. With militants of the PCdoB I feel I am no longer talking with people, but rather with positions. For any given question any member of the groups will give you the same answer, regardless of when or where you ask, and always in the same tone of ideological righteousness.

The difference of style extends to the methods of political action chosen by the two groups. As I discussed in my last letter, the PCdoB has very little work among what is known as "the bases", which in the case of the student movement means the students of various levels of political consciousness involved in forming grêmios in the schools. In the case of the rally, it was mainly petistas who did the footwork of organization, from the writing of pamphlets to the convocation of speakers to the visits to schools in the region to discuss the purpose of the rally. This work was done not in the name of the PT, but rather in the name of the student movement and the educational movement. Among the the organizers were those with no defined party affiliation, as well as those from other parties. Most petistas see their participation in the PT and in the student movement as separate but parallel activities. They are not in the student movement because they are petistas, but are involved in both as distinct expressions of their desire for social change. For students in the PCdoB there is a much more direct link between the party and their participation in the student movement, which is reflected in their vanguardism and the weakness of their work among the bases. The students from the PCdoB only appeared on the day of the rally, requesting to speak from the podium, in effect hitching a ride on the organizational work of others in order to do their work of securing quadros.

The relationship between the student movement and the political parties is still being heavily debated among the students. On the night of the rally, after the speeches had ended in confusion with the shouts of "partidarismo não!", clusters of students stood around the plaza for nearly an hour in animated debate about the conflicts raised by the rally. The students from the PCdoB, who had been barred from speaking because they weren't on the program, condemned the rally's organizers as anti-democratic. The youth from the PMDB who had stimulated the chants of apartidarismo denounced the petistas as sectarian agitators trying to monopolize the student movement. A group of petistas, in return, was labelling the whole argument of apartidarismo articulated by the PMDBista as "fascist", since by playing on the crowd's distaste for party politics it facilitated the manipulation

of the people by populist and/or authoritarian candidates, who exploit the people's lack of critical experience in evaluating candidates or political programs.

As municipal elections approach, the vigor of the debate increases, if not the clarity of the solutions. The PT traditionally declares that its main goal during elections is not to win, but to educate, and most importantly to stimulate a critical consciousness of government practices among a population with a historical tendency to receive and accept. The problem is that elections, by their very nature of reinforced sectarianism, tend to get in the way of the goal of "political discussion". Despite the PT's ambivalence on this point, the goal in an election is to win, to gain access to power with which to put one's proposals into practice. When the goal is to convince, with all of the accompanying hoopla, it is not always easy to reflect.

Here is where problems arise within the student movement, which in addition to the tensions of the other movements has certain characteristics all its own. One function, for example, of the adolescent thirst for agitation along with clear solutions, is the tendency of students at a certain stage of their political development to become emotionally sectarian, or on the other hand emotionally reject political alignment altogether (which is itself a species of alignment). Students tend to break up into more or less loosely defined camps, complete with slogans and cheerleaders. Frequently these slogans, easily picked up by those with little political experience, substitute real political discussion, just as the struggle for dominance in the movement impedes the educational goal of improving the schools. If this sectarianism exists most strongly among the closed political groups such as the PCdoB and the UJS, it is also present to varying degrees among petistas, PMDBistas and the "nonaligned", who if they differ in ideological orientation share in the adolescent enthusiasm for a good fight.

The reduction of the student movement to sectarian squabbling worries many students, especially those who have passed through the simple activist stage and are now hungry to deepen their ideological understanding. After the agitation of the rally, a group of petista students was disturbed that the fight over apartidarismo was "depoliticizing" the movement, not only because of the squabbling, but also because of the interpretations of "apartisan" that seek to avoid political debate or to mask sectarian interests. They scheduled several meetings to discuss the question of the party in the student movement, since many of them were less than clear about how to respond to the various accusations, and especially how to reconcile the apartisan nature of the movement with their involvement in the PT. Their goal was to write a document articulating for themselves and others the political nature of their participation in the student movement. Or in the language I've been using, they wanted to help themselves and the movement "become more political".

As of yet the document has not been written, and the students have had considerable difficulty in realizing the scheduled meetings. There are various reasons for this. One is that the student movement along with the city has entered into the intense activism of elections. As I am finishing this newsletter students are meeting outside of São Paulo at the state congress of UPES (Paulista Union of Secondary Students). At this congress the student leaders of the PT are forming an opposition front to try to gain the directorship of UPES from the hands of the students of the PCdoB. Afterwards the petistas want to change the practice of UPES to make it more "political" (that is, less interested in promoting party interests than in questioning educational practices.) But if the dizzy power struggles of prior congress are any indication, there is unlikely to be much room for political discussion until the congress is over.

Another reason for the difficulty in writing the document takes us into a wider question, too wide to develop in this newsletter. We enter into the problem of ideology. I've been referring to "political discussion" with quotes in order to transmit a sense of the weighty, but fundamentally vague way that this term is passed around here. When student activists say that they want more "political discussion", it generally indicates a dissatisfaction with the initial activist scheme of going to meetings, distributing pamphlets, organizing rallies, perhaps entering into the fights between factions for political space. They begin to feel the discrepancy between the intensity of their activism and the limitation of their political understanding. They go in search of ideology, of "political formation", as it is called here, with the intention of making their militancy more "political". Ideology responds to the hunger for coherence and integrity felt by youth as they head towards maturity, giving a basis for choices and moral positioning, as well a sense of control over the complicated events of the day.

But the realm of ideology is complicated. Which ideology should he commit himself to, and why? Marxist-leninism, liberal humanism, Trotskyism, integralism, pacifism, social-democracy, democratic-socialism, the field of choices is vast. Which concepts accurately respond to the complex historical conflicts of the moment, and which offer convenient logical systems without historical basis? How does one weigh certain benefits and sacrifices against others? What is more moral? What is more practical? And a further question - how does one integrate ideology into one's personal life? In the end, "becoming political" is essentially a personal negotiation, between one's individual growth and the events and ideas one encounters "out there".

Perhaps the difficulty in writing the document lies in the fact that for most of these students, their relationship with ideology still takes the form of a hunger. To dive into the questions above requires a commitment to intellectual work that most adolescents do not yet have (and many will never have). It's easier to immerse oneself in activism, picking up useful bits of ideology here and there. One may become as politically contradictory as the cross-current of ideologies in Brazil. But that's another letter.

PT - Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker's Party)
CUT - Central Única dos Trabalhadores. A central labor organization, connected to the PT.
PCdoB - Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil) One of two legal communist parties in Brazil.
PMDB - Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (Brazilian Party of Democratic Movement). A centrist umbrella party, which won a majority of government positions in the last elections.
PSDB - Partido de Social-Democracia Brasileiro (Brazilian Party of Social-Democracy) A left-center party just formed in July, 1988.
UJS - União de Juventude Socialista (Union of Socialist Youth) The youth organ of the PCdoB.
UMES, UPES, UBES - União (Municipal, Paulista, Brasileira) de Estudantes Secundaristas. These three groups, - city, state, and national - are the legal organs of the student movement.

Um abraço,



Received in Hanover 9/15/88

