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Family Life in Recife

Recife,  
Pernambuco.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York, 17.

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

A foreigner in any community is initially permitted a certain social mobility which is normally denied to local residents and even compatriots. He can be accepted by a much wider class range since he does not fit into any of the local stereotypes. Although knowledge through such mobility is bound to be superficial, as time goes on the breadth is necessarily sacrificed at the expense of depth, and by degrees he inevitably becomes more closely absorbed into one or other of the social strata.

After more than a year of visits to Recife, some aspects of middle and upper class urban life have come to impress themselves upon me as being significantly different from those to which I had been accustomed in Europe not only England, but also in other countries. What I have reported here, I hasten to point out, are impressions, unavoidably based upon a limited number of experiences and acquaintances. Yet, as time passes, these impressions become stronger, not weaker. I do not pretend to present a factual or impersonal account which, I believe, would be to attempt the impossible.

It is difficult to know to what extent Recife is typical of any Brazilian town, but from brief visits to other towns in the Northeast, and conversations with many Brazilians, Recife seems to be socially more traditional and closed than others of similar size and importance. Certainly, according to both Recifeans and Southerners, it is very different from towns in the South.

Recife, with some justification, proudly claims to be the capital of the Northeast. Only two cities are possible competitors and both of these lie on the periphery of the region. Fortaleza has only the headquarters of the Bank of the Northeast of Brazil to support its claim, and Salvador gives the impression of being more preoccupied with its contact with Rio de Janeiro than with its status in the Northeast. Recife conclusively established her claim when the head office of SUDENE (Superintendency for Development of the Northeast), the largest and most powerful regional organ, was located there, and with it all the satellite organisations which naturally tend to spring up in the same place.

With a kingdom of twenty five million inhabitants and the size of several countries of Europe put together, Recife could be expected to have a metropolitan air. While the place has physically burst at its seams, it has not the atmosphere of a big city. The component parts, the small centre, the smug sprawling suburbs and the slums of the semi-employed poor have not yet welded themselves together as an entity. It is a city of parts loosely joined together and still evolving painfully. Since the War, its population has multiplied at an alarming rate with the services unable to keep pace. Shops are overcrowded, traffic

jams a challenge to the most ambitious traffic engineer, hospitals overflowing, and unemployment rife. Telephones are in such demand that one is lucky to buy one for three hundred dollars, even after a long wait.

Two factors have contributed to this explosion; the extremely high birth rate combined with a rapidly falling infant mortality, and the continued immigration of those seeking relief from their rural poverty, or looking for wider horizons. Both of these phenomena are as true of the middle and upper classes as of the lower. With a retinue of maids and relatively few financial worries parents can afford to bring up a family of eight or more in comfort. At the same time, all those with educational or professional ambitions have headed for the capital. Many children of landowners were sent to school in Recife, and then stayed, or at least maintained a house there as well as in the country.

The aristocracy used to be based exclusively on landed wealth and on remarkably few families, all of which intermarried time and time again. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century the usineiros (sugar factory owners), by their intermediate status, paved the way for industrialists, and today the process of integration and acceptance is virtually complete. Bankers, cotton factory owners and others have succeeded in buying their way into society, while the wealth of those whose money lay exclusively in land has gradually diminished.

By degrees, as the closed circle is widened, the number of cross-cousin marriages is falling, but to an outsider it still seems an extraordinarily introverted society. One of the factors that serves to maintain this exclusiveness is the strength of family ties and the interest taken in their own family by both upper and middle classes. Inter-cousin marriages have helped to increase this still more, since relations common to both partners of a marriage are more likely to be visited than those related to only one. One girl said that she had always tried to avoid her ubiquitous male cousins, but had nevertheless succumbed in the end. Most, however, regard the liaison as natural, and harmful genetic side-effects seem to be few. In one case the offspring of a couple with only eight instead of sixteen great-grandparents between them suffered from abnormally high blood pressure, as a result of which most died in their infancy. In another family which had been marrying into itself for generations, one child was mentally retarded and another physically precocious. Most vehemently deny the dangers of such marriages, and blind themselves to the possibility.

The size of families makes such a state of affairs more natural than it might be in many countries. When a family of six to eight children is the norm, uncles, cousins and nephews immediately multiply to produce well over a hundred close relatives. Furthermore, once families have arrived in Recife they tend to stay, and as a result they are mainly concentrated within a small radius. A few have relatives who have emigrated south, but most live in the city or the country around. There is no tendency for families to spread out as occurs often in Europe, for reasons which should become clear later.

Size alone does not satisfactorily account for the closeness of families. Far more important than this is the affection felt for fellow members of a family, a fondness, as far as I can judge, both more deeply felt and more openly expressed than between their European counterparts. This is apparent at all levels: parents devote more attention to small children, and despite

the universal nanny, fondle them more; there is no teenage rebellion against authority, and even as adults uncles, aunts, cousins, or brothers and sisters generally see far more of each other than all but the very closest friends.

The family is regarded as a closed and sacrosanct unit. It is considered very bad form to criticize members of one's own family in a destructive way, nor would any friend or acquaintance do so. Family affairs are a private matter, and not a proper topic of conversation: while a polite interest is expected, a normal curiosity is considered inquisitive. With time and energy expended mainly upon relations, friends tend to be restricted to colleagues, former colleagues and more distant cousins who are treated as friends rather than relatives. In these circumstances it is not surprising that even among Brazilians, Recife society has a reputation for being closed, and consequently difficult to enter. An initial warmth, no doubt largely curiosity, with open invitations is common, but as the novelty wears off, one realizes that Recifenses' real interest lies in their own kith and kin.

However, in the rare cases when a friend is made, he is perhaps valued more highly than elsewhere. Friendship is not a word used lightly, and once accepted, a man will put himself out a great deal to help a friend. In regard to their rights and duties, friends are treated as members of the family.

Houses normally contain only the nuclear family. I have yet to come across one where grandparents are living in the same house. Although such houses must exist, they are perhaps rarer than in England, since even the old and infirm always have sufficient maids to look after them, and are therefore not physically dependent upon their offspring.

A common addition to the household, especially among those more recently arrived from the interior, is a filha de criação. The literal translation of this is adopted daughter, but in this case it normally refers to a girl of lower class brought up almost, but not quite, as a member of the family. They are usually unwanted children of farm employees, and are adopted in order to help with the housework and younger children when they are old enough. Their status is mid-way between a maid and a member of the family, but in company they are always kept on the other side of the green baize door.

For the size of families, houses seem remarkably small, although I have the impression that in many cases this is due to custom rather than necessity. Most live in one storey houses in tree-lined suburban avenues at some distance from the city centre. A few live in flats near the centre or along the one enormous beach, but two storey houses are a rarity, and belong only to the very richest families. The word for a house of more than one storey "sobrado" carries strong connotations of past grandeur. The very richest families live in large modern houses which they have built themselves, some of which are extremely handsome, or in one of the few great pseudo-gothic palaces built by former usineiros in the early part of this century. Their carefully tended gardens often have lamp-posts and asphalt paths with a uniformed watchman guarding the entrance. The air of impregnability is further increased by the permanent lack of any sign of life.

High value is attached to new houses, and the ultimate domestic ambition of most couples is to design and build their own house. If this is not immediately feasible, they will buy a plot of land which then remains

vacant until sufficient money has been saved to build. Antiquity is not valued in general, and the few remaining eighteenth and nineteenth century houses are mainly inhabited by poorer families. I have met many Recifeans who have remarked upon the inconvenience of the large rooms and thick walls of such houses. This I find curious, since both characteristics, size and thick walls, are much better suited to this kind of climate.

The typical middle or upper middle class house lies set back from the road in a small formal garden, has washed walls and a series of out-houses for the maids at the back of the building. Windows are protected with ornate iron bars against the ubiquitously feared but rarely successful thief. The focal point of the house is the terrace, furnished with easy chairs of wickerwork or plastic and a low table for drinks or glossy magazines. This is the functional equivalent of the sitting room in colder climates. Whether of wood, mosaics or tiles, floors throughout the house are bare. Moreover, any form of covering, such as an animal skin rug is so rare that it immediately catches one's eye. Windows are seldom fitted with curtains, and walls distempered pale blue or cream, hung with the odd picture or posed photograph of a wedding or long grown up child, both contribute to a somewhat clinical atmosphere, to me sadly lacking in shabby comfort.

The age of plastic is in full bloom: plastic covered chairs, plastic tablecloths, plastic roses (despite the availability of fresh flowers, artificial ones are preferred as they last longer), and frilly plastic covers for the stoves and liquifiers. Furniture is angular, tends to be heavy, and has disappointingly little variety. The one piece that is always an object of admiration and envy, and thus acts as a status symbol is the elegant antique cane sofa made of jacaranda wood, rarely bought, but usually inherited from relatives. Television sets are common, bookshelves a rarity. One seldom finds anything other than a glossy magazine inside a house. It is certain that very few families indeed read books, and even in the house of a professional, a doctor or a lawyer, one finds a small shelf of textbooks and only occasionally a book or two on a subject outside his field.

Children are jammed into two or three bedrooms and very few are given rooms to themselves. Even the richest families do not often have a playroom for the smaller children. Baths are uncommon, and central hot water systems unknown. Showers are sometimes fitted with an ingenious electric water heater which, from its sales, must have made the manufacturer a fortune. Yet all too often all that comes out is cold water, a healthy electric shock, or nothing at all as the holes are blocked. Kitchens are still the demesne of maids, who are given extraordinarily few labour saving devices to help them in their work.

Within such a setting, then, live the middle and upper class Recife families. The women of such households not only live there, they also spend their time there. Very few of them work, as most husbands forbid it. Some continue studying languages, usually English, or one of the more traditionally feminine arts such as dressmaking, and most would maintain that they read. However, although a very few do read foreign or Brazilian novels, most absorb themselves in paperback romances or thrillers, or else some of the numerous magazines published to occupy such ladies of leisure. Marrying young, from sixteen onwards, their schooling is cut short, especially as the arrival of the first child is almost guaranteed within the first year. One startling

exception is a friend with Pernambucan parents but brought up in the more rigorous South who returned to Recife to marry at the age of sixteen. Now with two small sons of school age, she also attends school all morning in order to complete her secondary education.

Most women lead vacuous lives: armed with a full complement of maids to cope with all the household chores and even to do most of the shopping, their main concern is their children, to whom they devote much attention and affection, and secondly their husbands. Apart from these two interests they have little to occupy their thoughts. Many envy the relative freedom of the American or European woman, and complain that their husbands will not let them lead more varied and demanding lives. As it is, the daily routine is more or less as follows: The morning is spent at home supervising the maids and playing with children too young to go to school. After lunch, a visit to the dressmaker or hairdresser, a guitar or language lesson, or a visit to some close relative breaks the monotony. The evening in all probability is spent in watching the television.

To fill idle moments and satisfy creative desire, a curious local art form, which could be described as a sign of desperate underemployment, flourishes amongst this sector of society. A passion for decorating useless objects to adorn the house or give as presents, and covering any shape or size of container with plastic frills, at times amounts almost to a mania. One such addict became really upset that she would not have time to finish painting enough shells gold and sticking ribbons onto them before Christmas. This particularly futile occupation, when so much desperately needs to be done for others, has rightly made some of the more socially aware angry.

Although almost all are Catholics, and most would maintain they were good Catholics, religion does not loom large. Sunday mass is not an institution and many regard an annual confession as sufficient, but all go through the formalities of baptism, church weddings and mass at the major festivals. Little interest is shown in charities or church activities, and while on the one hand most women are superficially aware of all the poverty around and never cease to bring it to one's notice, they are on the other hand, not concerned to do anything about it. One who carries on any form of voluntary work is highly regarded by others, but they show little inclination to join in.

With their very limited lives, conversation is also naturally restricted to one or two recurring topics, children, maids, clothes and the inevitable gossip. Considerable care is taken with appearance, but fashion lags months behind Rio de Janeiro, and a strong preference is shown for bright colours with little subtlety. Also, on the most sophisticated beach a bikini is thought sufficiently daring to receive widespread comment and to be forbidden by many of the more conservative parents.

Yet, however much women complain about their lot, the environment seems to have been remarkably successful in bringing up children. Most are happier, less complexed and more mature than their European counterparts. Both parents lavish them with affection: a childless couple is universally pitied, and it is thought a distinct abnormality for a couple not to want children immediately. The pleasures of parenthood are increased by the fact that the chores and less attractive jobs are left to the nanny, usually an ununiformed young girl from

the interior, and only in the very richest houses does one find the traditional strict nanny in a stiff collared, starched uniform. With all this care small children always look clean and scrubbed, and from an early age are highly conformist in behaviour. When they are difficult they show signs of being spoilt rather than neglected.

As children grow older, they spend a certain amount of time with friends of their own age, but at no stage is there a clear wish to break away from home, and the authority of their parents. Since schools of all types operate on a shift basis, with classes either in the morning or in the afternoon, they have a great deal of free time. Boys go off to the beach or cinema with their friends, and as they get older, to bars. A rather nebulous group known as the jovem guarda (young guard) is the Brazilian equivalent of the "with it" generation, but as far as Recife is concerned it masquerades itself as no more than an addiction to popular music and long hair. A boy with long hair is known as a playboy, and indeed it is one of the signs to the poor of a young rico. Popular music, not jazz which curiously is considered old-fashioned, of national, American and European origin fills much of the emptiness of the local youth. As soon as they are seventeen, boys divert part of their energy to cars, and the wealthier are given cars of their own. Motor bikes have not arrived. Yet, however much their interests lie outside the home, boys continue to live there, and to remain on very close terms with their parents until they get married.

Girls also stay at home until they find a husband, but they are far more carefully supervised, and the accepted code of behaviour for an unmarried girl is similar to that in England some forty years ago or more. The tradition is gradually weakening, a few of the more enlightened parents let their daughters go out without a chaperon, and a closer examination reveals that what is actually done and what is said to be done are not the same thing. Until she is officially engaged, a girl may not go out alone with a boy, but must either go with a group (which may break up in the course of the evening) or a third person as chaperone (often chosen to turn a blind eye). Extremely high value is laid on virginity; if she loses it a girl virtually forfeits her chance of marriage. Therefore everything is done to protect her from this misfortune. The system is vicious, since men know how carefully most girls are guarded and so are far more likely to try and take advantage of one left unprotected.

Girls naturally complain about these restrictions, but ineffectually and more as a matter of form rather than through any deep felt frustration. One whilst grumbling nevertheless admitted that it would not be worth breaking away from her parents since such behaviour would create a scandal and she would only succeed in making herself a social outcast. Certainly, the outcry that another created by living for a time with an artist seemed to me totally disproportionate to the offence: her parents finally succeeded in removing her and sending her to Rio de Janeiro "to recover".

Very high standards of conformity are expected, so that what might appear to an outsider as normal deviance, appears to Recife parents as almost psychopathic. One particularly memorable instance of this was of a friend with a young artist nephew. He had frequently talked of the boy, as he was worried by his abnormal behaviour. One night when we were visiting the boy was out, and our friend together with another of the boy's uncles

offered to show us his room. These two dignified middle aged men stole up the stairs, then rather like small children stealing sweets from their parents listened outside the door to make sure that there was nobody inside, gently opened it and gingerly turned on the light. My expectations with all these precautions had risen, but what lay in front of me was a room like any English undergraduate's room, rather tidier than many. At one end was an easel with some unfinished works stacked neatly away behind it. The two uncles prowled around examining the odd object that the boy had picked up, fascinated by this other world. I found it hard to show more than a polite interest in the scene.

Most boys have a nihilistic view of life, lack any form of idealism, and have little ambition. Apathy is too strong a word, but most have no feeling of commitment, and due no doubt partly to the enervating climate, have no drive. Although life is far more challenging than in England, youth in some ways seems to leap straight into the smug acceptance of middle age and feel that the goal is money and an easy life. They do not see themselves as a group to band together against the status quo and authority, with a need to assert their individuality. From all that I have heard, I also suspect that before the 1964 Revolution things were very different, and that fear of political recrimination inhibits and has successfully quelled much of the desire to try and improve the world around them.

Living at home until they get married with no intervening period of independence strengthens the relationship between boys and their parents. Recife has no institution of bachelor flats. For those whose families live elsewhere and are not fortunate enough to have friends or relatives with whom to stay, the common alternative for both sexes is the pensão (boarding house). These, of all types and prices, house bachelors, spinsters, couples and sometimes even complete families temporarily. It is considered perfectly respectable for an unmarried girl to live in one of the better ones, but for the most scrupulous there is always the possibility of living in a convent. For two or three girls to live in a flat unchaperoned leaves them open to gossip, and the general belief that they are leading, at any rate by local standards, very loose lives.

The converse to the seclusion and protection of women is the freedom of men, which is incomparably greater than the average Englishman. The Recife husband thinks that his wife's sphere of influence and interest should be limited to the home. Many forbid their wives to broaden their interests or to employ themselves outside the house for several reasons, but I suspect that the most honest was a man who said openly that he knew how easy it was to get other men's wives, and was therefore taking very good care of his own. Among the lower classes and occasionally among the middle, men feel that it is a sign of their own inadequacy if their wives have to help support the family. This they regard as a duty and prerogative of men. With women's severe intellectual limitations, men look at their wives as the runners of the home and the producers of their children, but for company they prefer other men, and for diversion other women.

The women show very little curiosity in their husbands' activities outside the house, and have little idea of how they spend their time. One wife told me that she never talked about problems related to her husband's

work as he worried about them all day and came home to relax. The ignorance is increased by the lack of telephone communications, but even when a wife may suspect her husband's behaviour, she often purposely shuts her eyes to it and probes no deeper since there is nothing that she can do about it. Brazil despite a popular desire for it, still has no divorce, and although legal separation is possible, neither party can marry again. Nevertheless, even if she remains on her own, the social stigma for a Recife woman is considerable, and she is treated as an outcast. As a result most prefer to stay married and without proof of their husbands' infidelity.

Men make the most of this liberty, and do so to such an extent that it is not uncommon for a rich man to keep two or three mistresses simultaneously in addition to his own wife, or at least to rent a flat in the town centre where he can take his women during the day. Such behaviour is regarded as perfectly normal by other men, and in one case, perhaps extreme, a man collaborated with his father-in-law against his wife, and his brother-in-law against his sister. Such freedom is defended on the grounds that women in the area far outnumber men, so that if men were to restrict themselves to only one woman, many would be left totally without a man. I have never seen any factual evidence to show that this premiss is true, but that is beside the point. An article in a local paper last year alleged that one house in seven in Recife contained a prostitute: this not unsurprisingly created an outcry, but on the broadest definition of the word, including the "kept women", it may not be an outrageous exaggeration.

The double standard of the value attached to virginity on one hand, and the freedom of men on the other appears to be paradoxical on first sight, but on closer examination proves to have been resolved by a class differentiation. Virginity is not prized on religious grounds; every girl has the practical fear that without her virginity no man will want to marry her, and she will be doomed to a life of lovers and uncertainty. The higher class girls are meticulously protected against this danger, but those of lower middle class origin often find themselves turning into "programme girls", who, once they have lost their virginity, are usually taken out on a casual basis by boys of a higher class, and are later partially kept by one or two of them as mistresses.

Night life in Recife has never been developed. After about eight o'clock until the cinemas disgorge their audiences, the city centre is completely dead. A few beer tables, one or two dimly lit bars with ludicrously expensive drinks, and the one night club, rumoured to be closing down shortly, are the only alternative meeting places. Along the beach restaurants seem to have a predictable short life cycle of novelty, discovery and overshadowing by another. Although the length of this is dependent on quality very few last more than a year. Only the "zone" near the docks with its prostitutes and seedier bars springs to life at night.

Most entertainment is carried on in private houses. Visiting is highly informal, but mostly between relatives: friends are expected to fit in with the family, and formal dinners or cocktail parties are rare. The English habit of immediately plying one's guests with drinks is much less rigidly adhered to here. Conversation flows freely without the need of artificial stimulation, but when drinks are offered, the commonest is whisky "nacional" or "contrabando" according to wealth and contacts. With meals too, there is



no drink formula although wine tends to be drunk at the more formal and beer at the less formal with the alternative of a home made fruit drink. However, at one of the grandest dinner parties that I have attended a full range of appetitifs was served before the meal and liqueurs after it, but during the multi-course meal only water was offered.

Food is not calculated to feed only the members of the family, and although few formal invitations are given, anybody appearing at the appropriate hour will be invited and expected to stay. For all classes, the main meal of the day is lunch, with a light evening meal. At both of these a wide choice of plates is served from which one is expected to eat a small quantity with no set order.

With company restricted mainly to members of the family, relatively little interest is shown in outsiders. Contact with the rest of Brazil, let alone the rest of the world, is slight. Possibilities of travel, except for the very richest, are few, owing to the huge distances between places of interest and the rudimentary system of communications. Brazil has not yet developed its tourist industry, and apart from business trips to the South, or a quinquennial visit to relatives in Rio de Janeiro, few have ever been beyond Pernambuco and the adjacent states.

At an age when in other countries they would be camping, hitch-hiking and going off on holidays away from their parents, the local youth, especially the girls, prefer to cling to their mothers' apron strings. Other than a vague interest in Rio, the United States and Europe they have little desire to travel. Moreover, to them to want to visit the North of Brazil is madness: what joys, they ask, can be found in a region yet more bare of civilization than our own? The annual holiday has not yet become a period for automatically escaping from home. During the school holidays a few families move to a flat near the city beach or migrate for part of the time to one of the more distant beaches, but many prefer to stay at home. The very richest go South or head for one of the more sophisticated quarters of the Northern hemisphere, but the large majority remain in a cocooned world.

The insularity, both real and psychological, never ceases to astonish me. Even day trips into the surrounding countryside are uncommon, and would normally be a visit to a friend or relative with a house in the country, or to a beach. Largely owing to the uninviting state of the roads, picnics and Sunday afternoon drives are unknown. Instead of this, a popular form of relaxation at any hour of the day or night is a drive round the city and through the suburbs with no particular destination. The pleasure is in the movement. Money that might have been used for travel is usually invested in a house by the sea or a "granja" near Recife. This latter is a smallholding with chickens and fruit trees designed to provide for family needs and to offer a place of refuge for weekends.

This isolation and insularity, which I cannot help feeling is partially self-imposed and is certainly self-generating has led to a paucity of intellectual curiosity and ideas remarkable in a city the size of Recife. The upper and middle classes take pride in the folk culture, the artifacts, oral tradition and dances of the poor. Yet, contributing nothing to its richness, they only enjoy it vicariously.

Of the arts, the most flourishing are undoubtedly painting and sculpture. With little or no formal training, a group of young artists have set themselves up in Olinda, the beautiful old state capital, now a suburb of Recife, and are working together as a school. They naturally have a strong influence over each other, but alas, are forced to work in isolation. Bright, at times harsh, colours are universal, and almost all are still primitives although a few of the more experienced are beginning to paint abstract designs. The sculptors work mainly in wood, and show a strong negroid influence. The ambition of these pioneers is to hold an exhibition in the south in order to be recognized, and then to win one of the very few scholarships to visit Europe.

Among the upper and middle classes it has become fashionable to patronize these local artists, and to take an considerable, though uncritical interest in their activities. They take great pride in the group, and any visitor to the city is taken at an early stage to visit their studios.

The other arts are sadly neglected. During the winter, fortnightly concerts are held in the theatre by the local amateur symphony orchestra, but these are so poorly attended that, in order not to play to an empty house, tickets are given away free. Few learn to play any instrument apart from the guitar, which is popular, and only one record shop out of more than fifteen has even a limited stock of classical music.

The town's theatre, an elegant pink building dating from the end of the last century, offers an occasional show, play or ballet, usually put on by a visiting company, and a small popular theatre puts on productions by local amateur groups and holds a permanent exhibition of works by local artists. The cinemas, more numerous but all owned by the same chain, rarely show a film more intellectually demanding than an epic or a musical. Most are American productions with Portuguese subtitles, and never have I seen a queue waiting at the entrance. For the more discriminating, one cinema shows slightly more off-beat films at eight o'clock on Saturday mornings, but the hour is enough to deter all but the real enthusiasts.

Mass media are not generally a source of intellectual stimulation. With one exception, all the numerous local radio stations broadcast continuous programmes of advertisements with popular music and an hourly news bulletin rattled off in order not to waste valuable advertising time. One station varies this with several daily serial plays. The most popular programme plays a record between every advertisement, and this also offers one hour of "erudite" music presented by Pernambuco Tramways on Sunday evenings. The university runs the one serious programme and offers mainly language courses and music from other countries. Its very small repertoire is almost all imported from the countries concerned, and its poor reception further reduces its limited audience.

The two television channels are also riddled with advertisements, and show little but videotapes of productions in the South. The most popular programmes are the daily serials, novelas, avidly watched by a great many of the middle class women. Yet the general standard is so low that, though addicted, even the least critical complain.

As mentioned earlier, very, very few read novels, and even fewer instructive books outside their own field. The universal source of information among all classes is Seleções, the local edition of the Reader's Digest, and

the great majority read only this and magazines. There are few book shops, and those that there are sell mainly textbooks.

In this cultural vacuum, there are a few, such as the artists, who have succeeded in overcoming the environmental torpor. Any aspiring writer or poet can publish his works and be sure of a limited readership with little criticism. It is an open market with no set standards to make entrance difficult. There is a group of "intellectuals", literary men and critics, who have access to the local press and through this medium scratch each other's backs. Since this circle is closed, the system has severe disadvantages: it encourages sycophants who fear for their own future if they voice open criticism, and more importantly it deadens intellectual stimulation. Yet, with the group's hold on the newspapers, it will be hard to break until the leading figures have faded out.

Creative thought is not nurtured by the system of education. Brazilian schools have adopted the French method, which concentrates on developing the memory, not the critical faculties, so that intellectual curiosity is rarely aroused. Furthermore, the academic level attained by most is much lower than in many countries. Women often do not complete their schooling, and a very low proportion of men go on to university. However, even if it is not emulated, learning is greatly respected, and various local expressions such as "delicate" and "a person of value" refer to people who have been educated at a university. Veneration of "doctors", those with any sort of a university degree, is still very high, especially among the lower classes.

The lack of interest in arts and intellectual activity is hard to explain. The educational system, climate, and isolation from other cities for stimulation, are all contributory factors, yet perhaps more relevant than any of these is simply the lack of tradition. Until recently, the majority of the rich in Recife were landowners whose interests lay outside the city, and whose leisure time was devoted to mentally undemanding activities. Recife never had a sophisticated urban society which spent its time and money on the arts, reading and the more intellectual pursuits.

It may be that with a growing interest in education, and increased contact through travel and mass media, things will change, but at the same time custom is a strong force, and it is difficult to feel the lack of something that one has never known. Members of the upper and middle classes generally seem happy, perhaps happier than those elsewhere since their lives are less complicated. The value attached to and the pleasure found in the family, I find, as a European, most enviable.

This newsletter has unintentionally turned out to be hyper-critical, and ethnocentricity has crept in too much. While I hoped to be mainly descriptive, it has undertones of disapproval.

One result of the present mode de vivre of the middle and upper classes, however, does merit criticism. The lack of intellectual curiosity and the smug acceptance of the status quo have led to a lack of social awareness which manifests itself in distressingly little sympathy in and understanding of the problems of others. They are in general too

preoccupied with materially emulating those richer than themselves, and have little time or interest in helping the seething mass of those poorer than themselves to reach even a tolerable standard of living.

Yours sincerely,

*Fanny Mitchell.*

Fanny Mitchell.

Received in New York May 5, 1967.