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Understanding of Society

Brazil at [the dawn of] 2020
Report of a Listening Post held in Rio de Janeiro, January 22, 2020

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Members/Participants: 14

PART 1 THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Context

Brazil is a country with marked social inequality that is experiencing a scenario of political disjunction, in which "us vs. them" is cemented, and this was brought up in the group's reflections.

In the city of Rio de Janeiro, where the LP session was held, inequality is even more visible due to the local geography. Lower, middle and upper class people live close to each other and share social spaces regularly.

As the Listening Post started with some opening statements, followed by a brief personal introduction, the participants were readily available to express their views and feelings about their experience in the current world, in the Brazilian context.

Inequality was brought up in the group from the sharing of personal experiences and was discussed throughout the LP, with moments of questioning and different points of view being expressed.

The participant that first raised the topic was the one who broached the theme of education in Brazil, which then became the keynote of the session, giving rise to other directly related topics. Education was discussed especially from the perspective of its transforming role in one's personal experiences and in collective reality.

 "I'm now not sure which one is transformative: education? Technology?"

"I'm from the Northeast. To get to school, I would walk five kilometers there and back. My teacher was my role model, I graduated in law, I want to defend poor people of any background, gender, ethnicity, religion."

"Education has gotten much worse."

"It makes me sick to see that nothing has changed in education, we haven't seen any progress on a public level, our issues are handled in the same way, I feel that we

ended up conveying demotivation, discredit. But I keep working and wanting to shake people up."

"It is frustrating, exhausting, tiresome. I believe in education. Today, I teach at a project where I was a student myself. Students want to be heard and loved wherever they go. Today, we learn things on our own. Back in the day, I didn't know what questioning meant; now, I have access to things that no one in my family had. I am the first with a degree in my family. Today, I ask why things are the way they are, I share my own views of ethics and morals."

As the testimonies pointed out to the value of education as a prerequisite for social transformation and mobility, the issues of social inequality and differences in access to opportunities were touched on more forcefully. Different stances, ranging from a more individual view to a sense of collectivity became clear, with a perspective of voluntary action, mobilization and change.

"I feel a little out of the Brazil that is featured on the newspapers. I am from a different background, I am not just surviving, I am trying to understand, I feel sad. I look for ways to get out of the bubble, so I teach in a social project."

"I see selfishness, people only caring about themselves, each one wanting to take their place, to be above others."

"I live closer to the struggles of life. Living in an impoverished area is different, but everyone needs to get out of their comfort zone, rather than just waiting on the government. You have to adopt kids, carry out activities in the community without a cell phone, listen, educate, cultivate respect, "good morning", "please", "thank you." I will do my share."

"And who is going to make this change? My biggest concern is the lack of affection, we don't listen, we don't communicate, all of these things make me worried. I was always at the forefront of the 2013 protests and watched the black block movement closely. I realized that I was becoming overly contaminated by violence and bad news. I decided to stay away from that and turned the TV off. I'm optimistic. Today, I want to be an agent of change, I don't believe in the system we live in."

While a desire for change was expressed, there were different levels of mixed feelings, oscillating between belief in a promising future and lack of hope, and acting both on a micro and on a macro level.

"There's a great deal of hopelessness, the political developments in Brazil and in the world show democratization in crisis. It is hard to believe in alternatives, I've fought, I've been on the streets, but now what? It is easy to be hopeful when you are young."

"I still believe, I still have hope. Some are there to promote change and ask students what they know — as in some sort of reciprocal learning; I believe and I will find out if it works when I get old. My generation is building on different concepts (morals, judgment, questioning)."

"I am rediscovering myself, I have hope in myself and in youth, I want to help a part of society in some way, I want to keep on learning and reviewing concepts. My enthusiasm is back, I experience all sorts of problems, but I am confident."

"We need to view it through a broader, macro lens."

"The State is responsible for providing citizens with opportunities. This responsibility cannot be transferred to the individuals, otherwise we will live your utopia."

"I am thrilled to see young people doing things. I keep hope alive. It may all look horrible, but I believe in the multiplying factor."

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

Theme 1: **Education as an agent of transformation**

The theme of education was the keynote of the session. The perception of the lack of consistent public education policies reaching all social classes emerged as one of the main factors for the maintenance of social and intellectual inequality in Brazil.

Formal education seems to be seen as a powerful instrument of evolution and independence, as something that can promote paradigm shifts, broaden horizons, offer possibilities and make a better (critical) interpretation of reality.

In deeper discussions, the group brought up emotional issues, where the ability to listen and the possibility of affection in interpersonal relationships are educational (educating?) attitudes that foster the actions that are necessary for the transformation of both the individuals and the society.

Theme 2: Individual vs. Collective

The second theme that emerged strongly in the group was individual vs. collective, with an analysis of an original drama, which seeks to understand "who I am" by understanding "who is the other".

The individual (subject) realm is influenced by the surrounding collective realm and is more complex in terms of its functioning and in the demands it imposes on individuals. The collective realm appears in the discussions represented by the State, the school, the community.

The individual vs. collective paradox was evidenced in views regarding the impact of one-to-one social actions and the capacity of individuals to organize themselves into groups capable of impacting other groups, with a broader scope, stronger impact and potential for transformation.

Theme 3: Hopelessness vs. Hope

Another conflicting topic that emerged strongly in the group discussions was that in which the feeling of hopelessness is interleaved with the feeling of hope in individual and collective actions as an alternative way to fill the gap left by the State.

The enthusiasm to act individually and/or collectively or the lack of it is circumstantial. Therefore, it oscillates between the willingness to act and the disbelief in results. These feelings were expressed regardless of the social or intellectual position of the individual demonstrating them.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

The group experienced some difficulty in suggesting more collective solutions to the criticisms made to the current Brazilian society. The striking differences between all those present (which mirror the differences in the inclusive society) generated, to a certain extent, aggressiveness in the debates, with points of view and counterarguments being expressed and, very often, little empathy to the others' views. The few attempts to reconcile opinion were not enough to put everyone "on the same page."

Then, individual stances on the problems and experiences lived are made clear, thereby producing well-marked subgroups with different likings and points of view, characterizing a situation of "us versus them." This kind of impasse reflects the immaturity of Brazilian society to see common good as the way out of the evils it points out and criticizes, and to realize that living together in a democratic and participatory society means not having all individual desires and aspirations met. The common social good seems to be one's own good or the good of the group to which one belong.
Paradoxically, the pain experienced by everyone in the scenarios presented is collective.

Hypothesis 1

Considering the socio-economic differences of Brazilian society (notably in Rio de Janeiro) that cause fear of stagnation, non-development and non-personal and society evolution, the participants assume that higher education is the way to evolve, to have social ascension, to move forward (to leave their place of origin).
Thus, the anguish of being left behind, of being forgotten, of personal non-fulfillment is offset by the magical thought of the pursuit of education as the only way out, as salvation.

Hypothesis 2

Amidst the striking social and individual differences found in the Brazilian reality, and the perception of the government's incompetence to provide well-being for all, there is a feeling that it is hard to gather and integrate everyone around a single purpose, a common understanding and a shared solution.
Faced with this, some participants consider "helping those in need" as a sort of "I'm-doing-my-share" type of solution that relieves the guilt of passivity while providing a greater sense of participation, belonging and citizenship.

Hypothesis 3

Again, the striking differences between all: of opinion, social background and purpose, make individuals resort to their primary groups of reference, looking for identification, acceptance and affection.
By doing so, they reaffirm the differences they would like to diminish and increase anxiety and conflict in their relationship with others.

Rio de Janeiro, January 31, 2020, Luis Felipe Cortoni, Patrícia Horta, Rosangela Bacima da Silva