

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Chile and the World at the Dawn of 2013
Report of a Listening Post held in January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post we were invited to identify, contribute, and explore our experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context.

Part 1. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represent a clustering of at least some of these themes:

1. Neo-liberal Perversion
2. Crisis of Confidence
3. Transformation of Education
4. Adolescent Society

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal world', their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Neo-liberal Perversion

Analysis: The participants expressed the great anxiety caused by the awareness of their being participating in a society entrenched in neo-liberalism's perversion, which strongly pervades peoples' lives, pinning them down in such a way that there seems to be no liberating escape from it, being inevitably under the control of the anonymous forces of the market, consumption and capitalist production. Notwithstanding said anxieties, the participants celebrated the fact that today, as never before, there is an exposure of the perversion of neo-liberalism and a global 'falling of the veils', which unmask the evils and damages that this ideology has caused in people, in societies and in the unlimited exploitation of natural resources.

The end of the world was prophesied for 2012 and it is actually happening, in the sense that it was announced that humanity would concur in putting an end to the capitalist system, replacing it with a new world order, a more humane, just and respectful one. However, an outcrop arises between the two systems, which is the anger that crops up at being immersed and in collusion with the perversion, anger that is kept hidden, repressed by fear or because there is no way to channel so that it may enable change. Notwithstanding, faced with the possibility of a transformation of society, the paralyzing question emerges as to whether it is actually possible to replace capitalism; of how to be certain that the change may be achieved and that it is for the best. Or, perhaps, change is definitely not possible and it is not worthwhile to undertake risky actions. Neo-liberalism

seems to be so strong, so powerful, so controlling and effective, that it overwhelms people, infiltrating them with despair and robotic obedience. People have a special attachment to the perversion of consumption, there is an attraction that provides pleasure and wellbeing in the act of visiting the Malls; buying goods and services provides a pleasure that leads to a compulsion for consumption, indebtedness, and thus to an endless circuit.

The participants reiterated their anxieties as to how to get rid of the perverse neo-liberalism; they were surprised to see how the more vulnerable Chileans, through consumption, support and legitimize the corrupt and exploitative businessmen who have committed great swindles or frauds. The reflection ended with the narrative of a dream by one of the participants: the narrative referred to a huge locomotive standing still in the middle of the desert in the North of Chile, with its immense metal body corroded by rust, without the capacity to move, being destroyed by the passing of time. It is thought that the oneiric metaphor symbolizes the difficulty people have to free themselves of social formats and conventions, to open themselves to creativity, to renew the way they are, to renew their lifestyles. The dream gave the group the satisfaction of realizing that, at least at present, people are more awake, less trapped in the numbness that neo-liberal perversion brings to human existence.

Hypothesis: Through group reflection, the participants got in touch with the anxiety associated to ascertaining that they live in a perverse society and that, anonymously, they contribute to its operation and maintenance. Underlying the anxiety, there is the rage, powerlessness, fear and insecurity felt at not finding answers that will provide effective solutions to escape the capitalist perversion. The individuals rationalize their conflicts and insecurities, idealize utopian solutions agreed at a global level. Finally, awareness emerges: overcoming this perversion is a challenge for individuals to think about their circumstances and agree on actions with the collaboration of others. With this insight, anxiety remained alive in the group.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Crisis of Confidence

Analysis: The fact that there is greater mass awareness of the problems in the world and in society, has the aggravating factor of generating a great crisis of confidence from which no one knows how to get out because we are programmed to act according to established codes, to contribute to the system's functionality in an orderly and precise manner. Individuals are not prepared to react in the face of something new that perturbs and surprises, of not knowing what to do when the human mind explodes in confusion. The crisis is the weakening of the mores, and there arises a questioning of the meaning of life itself, there is a lack of certainty regarding the traditions that provide confidence and safety. The crisis of confidence sets forth the need to look for new, different things, to find new dreams, to create new internal and social realities.

The crisis of confidence corrodes relationships between individuals and with groups, the sense of belonging is reduced to those who are closest and who guarantee loyalty. When extended relationships are no longer trusted, people find refuge in redemptive fantasies that presage the return of the Messiah who will establish a social order where trust will predominate among men in a natural way. The lack of trust fragments life, there is no communication between people, no one listens to others, and there is a lack of interest in getting to know the reality of others. Individuals enclose themselves within him / her selves, people stay put in what is known, individuals are in no condition to get to know the others because there are fears about how to act, of the reaction others might have, whether it will be a welcome or an aggression.

Lack of confidence affects everyday life, carrying out 'practical things' when individuals participate in institutions that do not inspire confidence, respect towards others, safety in sharing expectations, and the knowledge that there will be a response in coherence to their needs. This is what happens in the case of Justice, the Church, and Education; institutions that lose credibility and put people, youngsters, and families in a situation of confusion as to how to proceed and live within society, how to find solutions to human problems.

In the sphere of the individual, lack of self-confidence is destabilizing because there is a loss of the capacity to value what one is, to believe in one's own emotions and reasoning, which leads to the 'herd' behavior, to follow the mass in order to be equal to the others, thus losing what is distinctive to each individual. The individual is alienated from himself; he experiences his sorrows in the privacy of his inner world, in solitude, individualistically and indifferent to others. Notwithstanding the above, the participants acknowledged that change is possible insofar as people have the courage to show signs of trust that will encourage reciprocity from others, thus providing the possibility for collective processes to be triggered where confidence will socially expand. To put an end to the lack of confidence, it is essential that people get rid of their selfishness, stop isolating themselves due to their fear of rejection; it requires daring to be vulnerable and waging that the others are able to welcome and respond positively to initiatives of confidence.

Hypothesis: The participants reflected on the matter of mistrust – crisis of confidence in Chilean society, disclosing anxieties and a constellation of other emotions, such as selfishness, loneliness, vulnerability, and love. In reflection, it was found that this issue deeply affects individual life, family life and life in society. Participants had the clarity to realize that the individual has the responsibility to undertake initiatives – within the social context in which he participates – to overcome the confidence crisis. This assumes that the individual is able to address the matter of trust – mistrust from a depressive position, with patience, curbing impatience and despondency.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Transformation of Education

Analysis: Education is a hot issue for society: how to form the new generations with justice, fairness, and quality. Currently, education in Chile is disastrous, particularly higher education, where private universities discredit tertiary education through a management geared to entrepreneurial profit with little or no concern for the quality of their students' learning. At present, society is shaken by scandals in private universities where Management has incurred in bribes to obtain accreditation. This has resulted in the closing of such universities, thus leaving students facing the harsh reality of not knowing how they are going to finish their professional studies.

In order to transform education, the needs of human beings must be understood; excessive valuation of performance must be set aside, and young people must be trained in sharing, in creating awareness of the social and environmental respect required to curb the current crisis. There must be a rethinking of how the human brain is trained, stimulating the development of the right hemisphere – the emotional part. There must be a long-term project founded on solid grounds and quality objectives. The meaning of educating, which assumes extracting the best from people, is incompatible with access to education being mediated by the availability of money. Paying for education has the effect of forming students that will subsequently incorporate to society with a mercantilist mind, thinking on how to obtain quick returns on their educational investment. This is an individualism that fragments society. Education in Chile is a 'broken mirror' where the image is so shattered that it is no longer possible to recognize in it our identity as a society.

The 'broken mirror' implies a difficulty to have a collective project of groups that can think and who have the political capacity to influence the country's decisions. The 'broken mirror' is also related to a fragmented memory, to be able to articulate a discourse that takes into account the significant events of the past. It is feared that the Chile of the future will not have the memory to remember the protests occurred recently in defense of education and the preservation of Patagonia.

To change education requires creativity. Also, being generous with what we do, to provide it overcoming the paralysis caused by fear. Students destabilized the system because they were the driving power behind disturbances, seeking citizens' emancipation. The problem lies with the adults who do not know how to join and strengthen the students' actions. Adults take away energy

from young people's changes by making adjustments to adapt the system, and leaving everything as it was.

Changes in education cause fear because they may be extremely radical and result in violence and terrorism, subsequently reverting to conservative dictatorships that are equally violent and repressive. Chile has the tragic legacy of a dictatorship but, nonetheless, the country is different today, young people dare to do what is new, they are strong. The changes brought about by the election of mayors are encouraging, as the citizenship had the capacity to renovate authorities with a democratic spirit, putting an end to political enclaves of Pinochetistas and the extreme right-wing. These renovations are examples of education, of collective learning, and that change is possible through community participation.

Hypothesis: Individuals address the complex issue of how to transform education in Chile considering the inequities, abuses and suffering it causes in society, families and young people. Reflection on this matter considered a wide range of aspects that show tensions, contradictions and ambiguities in the improvement of education. The group had the capacity to contain conflicts and to think about them. On the other hand, the group acknowledged recent experiences in Chilean society that testify to collective learning through the initiative of individuals and the agreement on collective action.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

Adolescent Society

Analysis: The group believes that what is traditionally understood by social role has little significance at present, and consequently the need arises to search for new forms of participation in society, which are made apparent by the social mobilizations, and particularly by what the student movement has done. One can observe an evolution in the concept of citizenship, which evidences greater capacity to challenge the established order. The vote is seen as a ritual with very little value. In this context, the idea is set forth that economic indicators and an increase in national GDP are not sufficient to show our reality. Quite on the contrary, such figures are misleading, and therefore, a much more mobilized society with a desire for change is clearly evident.

However, many difficulties were expressed in the group in relation to taking actions that imply an effective leadership. There are many followers, but very few leaders. Social justice emerges as the big overall umbrella to exercise the role of citizen and thus be able to implement the actions required to change. Notwithstanding the above, there would be neither the time nor the space to join these causes with a certain level of effectiveness, as alienation and individualism arise as a stopping block against the pursuit of collective spaces. The question arises as to why this type of battle flag is needed to act as a catalyst for joint projects. It was also revealed, with a certain amount of guilt, that individual retributions and benefits are sought for mobilizing, and when these are not clear, stagnation is empowered.

It is in this context that the concept of metropolis is brought up to show how difficult it is to accept that we live in a densely populated urban environment in which, paradoxically, we strongly experience individualism and loneliness. This is linked to more romantic visions showing how life in smaller towns or in the countryside would allow spaces for encounter, as well as having more time to connect with others. Thus, the fact that 'we want it all' is questioned, and that, therefore, it is difficult to accept the advantages and difficulties involved in living in a metropolis like Santiago. 'Wanting it all' is seen as a sign of great greed and the need to become 'epic citizens' to really be able to translate personal intentions into actions for change that will have an impact on others. A grim mood and the threat of feeling that "we are being screwed" hangs constantly over the group. A similar pessimism may also be seen in the idea that "nothing has been achieved" with the mobilizations experienced by the country during the past few years.

At a social level, this translates in the desire to be a developed country, a member of the OECD. This image of an ideal and egalitarian country becomes a very demanding referent. Such line of

thought shows a difficulty to include the costs implied in assuming the contradictions and limitations we have as a country. The image of an adolescent society explains the difficulties involved in what is described as “the world of the grown-ups”, under the slogan “I don’t want to grow up”. The explanation that we are a society with weak foundations and scant awareness of our history emerges as a reply to the confusion and lack of clarity experienced by the group.

Hypothesis: The group lives with great anxiety the impotence felt in the face of the speed of the urban pace of life and the lack of psychological and relational space to be able to find a meaning to daily existence. The need to interact with the dispossessed and with those suffering social injustice appears as a possible path, but one, however, that is hard to materialize both at the level of the closer social spaces (neighborhood, work, etc.) and at a more macro level. Obtaining personal gains is experienced with a great amount of guilt and, therefore, there is an idealized longing for the life of the other as a possible way out. The fantasies that by forcing ourselves to act in a more inclusive way with our neighbors (Latin American countries and people from our neighborhood) will provide us with the answers we search for collide with the reality of life in the metropolis. In this framework, the fantasy seems to fade when the group realizes the threat of the migratory phenomenon that has strongly increased in the country. This phenomenon is experienced as a ‘time bomb’ that shows the difficulties in co-existing with this other-different-from-me that is the immigrant, when the relation inevitably takes place within our own borders. The adolescent society may continue to long for and enjoy the fantasy that development is close. However, enjoyment is possible insofar as assuming adulthood is projected to infinity.

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