"Chile and the World at the Dawn of 2008"

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

1) Materialism and quality of life in Society

Those attending the listening post find that the quality of life of Chilean society is highly deteriorated, and that this is a cause of discomfort, frustration, stress and mental pathologies. As they participate in the society, people are wrapped up in a frenetic activism that is unforgiving, especially at work, where effective responses are needed to retain one's position. They participate in overly extensive work hours, which drain energies, leaving little or nothing left for the enjoyment of personal, social, or family life. For young women, the choice for maternity and childcare becomes difficult to balance against the overwhelming work demands, the imperative of generating an income, and the absence of proper support. There is a strong drive towards money as the access to consumption and the possession of goods. Shopping malls have become substitutes for entertainment, where people attend the spectacle of store product displays in order to receive the stimulation that drives them to buy things. People's identity is formed in having; a compulsive sense of having that provides distinction in owning what is now in style, giving the appearance of success.

Behind consumerism there is an illusion of finding happiness in a fast, constant way, without great effort. There isn't a problem if one has no money, since there are dozens of banks and stores that offer loans and credit cards in order to achieve one's wishes. Then comes the harsh reality of debt, having to pay for loans, and high interest rates, which leads to people having to take on new debt in order to manage those payments they acquired before, and become unsustainable because they surpass their income level. There is a vicious circle in this, which imprisons people in illusions of happiness through consuming, and gets them trapped by debts, so that then they resignedly accept whatever employment conditions they are offered, out of desperation. This last situation is what guarantees that the circle, where the quest for an ideal of happiness is made through consumption, will start over again. Consumerism provides an appearance of wealth and success that seems contradictory with the country's poverty, its crime level, and the feeling of being part of a society that is selfish, unsafe, and has weak mechanisms of social protection. Television, with its vulgar, coarse and sensationalist shows, is the common person's escape from frustration and unease in chilean society. Television shows *narcotize* people's minds, thus numbing the ability for critical thought before society and participation in it. Deterioration of the quality of life causes despair, since the social networks that allow for authentic human encounters, where people are valued for who they are, as opposed to what they have, enjoying safety and protection, have weakened. People feel discouraged, because they don't know how to turn their quality of life around, because they perceive the system's expectations as very powerful. Individualism takes on among people, yearning for a society of times past, the wish to live in cities other than Santiago, because of the belief that there is a better life there.

These dreams serve as fleeting psychological escapes from reality in a society that becomes suffocating.

Hypothesis:
The deterioration in the quality of life of chilean people finds an explanation in the regressive and narcissistic way in which they relate to society. People relate to the idealization society makes of work, consumption, the market, and credit as a way of attaining happiness and wellbeing. Individuals are moved by childish fantasies that involve satisfying a primitive narcissism, where the most diverse desires and aspirations are stored. To blindly adhere to society's culture gives the illusion of encountering a generous and abundant motherly bosom, nourishing without boundaries. In their fantasies, people lose sense of reality, of the limits in their work income, the limits in their ability, restrictions of the context they live in, and of the responsibilities they take on with every decision. In the individual act of consuming everything can be accessible and subject to be acquired. Social participation involves people in collective dynamics where the promise of satisfying narcissistic needs is very powerful. In such conditions it is hard to maintain individuality, and to exert personal authority in order to keep social expectations at bay, and to be able to live by what one truly wants, needs, and is able to accomplish. By responding to their narcissistic callings, people end up anonymously contributing to their own lifeís deterioration.

2) Power, participation, and powerlessness

The second subject addressed on the listening post refers to power in society and citizens. Society is considered an entity of enormous dimensions, with a high concentration of power that allows for people's actions to be controlled. Individuals, before a society of such characteristics, reach a 'microbe-like' dimension, which is to say that they feel an enormous sense of inability in trying to have some form of influence over the course of society's situations and events. Society's image is of a totalitarian, controlling one, accompanied by the perception of a force that annihilates the individual, who does nothing but follow social rules, because there is nothing else that can be done.

Within this devastating political framework, specific reference is made to the power of Chilean institutions, which are conducted in an authoritarian way, and therefore not allowing for citizen participation. It has been shown how the leaders responsible for public policy have failed in major endeavors due to the complete lack of participation of the people who deal with the problems, know them, and know how to solve them. An emblematic example of this is Santiago's public transportation crisis, when the government started a new system which aimed to bring more efficiency to city travel, and to improve user satisfaction. The outcome is a fiasco, with complete inefficiency, chaos, and lack of buses, which leads to people having to travel in crammed vehicles, in what resembles cattle transportation. Throughout this transport crisis, the resignation and passiveness of the users is surprising, as they practically haven't demonstrated their enormous amounts of contained anger, generated by the severe pains they have gone through as a result of the conflict.

Against society's totalitarian power, people are discouraged of participating. They sink into shyness, and leave responsibility in the hands of the powerful, politicians, the government, or businesspeople, who have enough power to define the course of the country. This position of resigning to exert individual power generates sadness and depression, because of the helplessness it entails. There is also another position, cynical and destructive, consisting of finding how to gain personal advantage from society and

its institutions. In this position, the belief is that, in the log run, a person always has the losing end in relating with institutions, and therefore it is fair to face society with a deceitful disposition, for that is the way to get ahead. Chileans are considered to have adolescent behaviors, avoiding taking charge of their own fate and that of others, their main justification being the pointlessness of participating.

Those attending the Listening Post also discuss how to recover protagonism and participation in society's affairs, how to make Chileans shake off the numbness and apathy, learn how to speak up, have a voice, and fight for what matters. Taking this step requires breaking the dependency on institutions, abandoning the role of the victim, regaining freedom, and for individuals to be more self-sufficient. Reaching this position comes with its own responsibilities and risks.

Hypothesis:
Chileans go through uneasiness and perplexity as they face the profound transformation of society, where institutions based on dependency, which have brought certainty, safety and protection to their lives for a long time, have been dismantled. Today, post industrial society forces individuals to be self-sufficient, to face the uncertainty of change, and to live with enormous amounts of anxiety. These efforts seemingly surpass people's psychic ability to accept reality, tolerate conflict, contradiction, to be responsible for their actions, and cooperate with others to solve problems. Inadvertently, people use defense mechanisms against the suffocation caused by social relations, perceiving themselves as victims, powerless, without resources, blaming passiveness and lack of participation on the system. The institutions' leaders are proper scapegoats for individuals to project their own inadequacies, and to feel released from the guilt of not taking charge for themselves, or considering their responsibility in social matters. People's cooperation is especially needed in post industrial society, so that they can add to the understanding and solution of complex dilemmas with intelligence, energy and creativity. Chilean reality differs from such cooperation, as people are dazed and paralyzed when facing society's uncertainty, and they easily turn to repression and rationalization, eliminating the possibility of thinking soundly and taking responsibility towards their own life and social relations.

3) Right to difference and tolerance

This matter addresses society's ability to allow people and groups to openly express distinctive identity differences relative to social conventionalisms, and at the same it wonders whether society has tolerance and respect for people. The emotional tone in which the Listening Post discusses this matter differs notoriously from the pessimism that accompanies the two previous subjects. The group analyzes the issue of differences in society under a prism of great optimism, as it believes that Chile has achieved great progress in the area.

Today there is openness for being different from the rest; spaces of liberty are offered to be different, and to display forms of identity that didn't exist before, or were only expressed in private environments that guaranteed protection. For instance, there is more freedom to express different sexual identities. Along with heterosexuality, lesbianism and homosexuality are manifested in a more open way. The globalization of society has influenced this openness to difference, since it involves the arrival of immigrants from various races and countries, which has allowed us to get to know different cultures and ways of life.

The wider space available for difference in society is attractive for the exploration of new identities. However, it is also frightening, because in the choices one makes, there is uncertainty, and a risk of being stigmatized and excluded. Throughout the analysis made by the people at the Listening Post, it is evident that acceptance and tolerance of difference in society is a very relative matter. There are opinions that question the optimism with which the subject of differences has been addressed. Some point out that difference in sexual orientation — lesbianism and homosexuality — is a disease, and as such, its expression mustn't be tolerated, and should be stopped. Incidentally, there is communication of preconceived and stereotyped notions of sexual difference in these opinions, influenced by perverse, destructive attributes which suggest the need for vigilance and control. Observations about discrimination in the country are also added, mainly against women, people of different races and those of a lower socioeconomic level. This is seen many times in personnel selection, and in the access to higher positions in organizations. In spite of the facts that contradict the optimism in analyzing differences, the group of Listening Post participants persists in the belief that Chile has made tremendous progress in providing rights and in tolerance of those who are different, and this is a subject that involves, says the group, 'happy' achievements.

Hypothesis:
The optimism shown by the Learning Post group regarding Chileans' ability to accept and carry themselves constructively when facing differences, is an idealization. It serves as a defense against the anxiety caused by having to confront difference, with its potential effects of conflict and destabilizing of identity. The gregarious instinct leading to a uniformity of thought, trivializing social differences, dominates over the group, generating a sense of contentment over society's alleged progress. What happens at the Listening Post is a reflection of the Chilean society's tendency to repress conflict related to difference between individuals and groups, which leads to an inability to think and creatively deal with contradiction. In today's Chile, there is an unusual atmosphere of physical and moral violence, which shows how Chileans tend to be taken over by primitive defenses, charged with aggression, when facing various types of identity differences. The use of physical and moral violence follows the logic of politics and the powerful, who direct their conflict and contradiction towards individuals and groups which are weaker and more vulnerable in their differences. This way those with power maintain a clean identity at the expense of those who are weaker. Sometimes, those who are more vulnerable organize and resist aggression, giving way to a spiral of violence which often derives in tragic epilogues of fatal victims. An example of this is the complex conflict that agitates Chilean society today, between one of the country's native groups and the government.

Conveners: Eduardo Acuna & Matìas Sanfuentes