Not the Last Word: Point and Counter-Point

The Discovery of Affluenza and the *Favelas* Above:

A Rising Tide Brings the End of Dry Economics

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There is a Yorkshire expression, that many people are fond of quoting, to account for strange behaviour: "There's nowt so queer as folk". Some folk, always other folk and never oneself, are more queer than others (and many Englishmen would claim that Yorkshire folk are stranger than most, but that's another story).

The expression came to mind when I read a column in *Icaro*, the magazine of Varig, the Brazilian airline. I am not fond of flying at the best of times and finding a magazine called *Icaro* in the seat pocket of a fully-laden jet increased my anxiety. Icaro, presumably, is Portuguese for that legendary character Icarus who, in attempting to escape from Crete, flew so high that the sun melted the wax that held his wings on with the consequence that he fell in the sea. A stranger title for an airline magazine would be hard to find.

The column in the magazine was entitled *Flashes* and concentrated on "The pains and misfortunes of opulence". According to this article, the Americans (who else) have discovered a new disease. The disease:

> may show in an acute manner in winners of large lottery prizes, or in anyone who has made a quick fortune. Or it might be a chronic condition in families where riches pass from generation to generation. It's a type of "disease of opulence" that Americans have baptized affluenza . . .
>
> *(Icaro, p. 8, Sept/Oct, 1988)*

The column, evidently based on a piece in *Time*, went on to describe "the emotional misery" of those people who "lead lives surrounded by luxury". Needless to say, there are psychoanalysts and psychiatrists at work here.

Aryeh Maidenbaum, from New York, describes how very rich people are brought up by nannies, protected from the stress of having to work and fall victim to "affluenza":

> Sometimes the sensation of not having earned one's money outshines the pleasure of spending it and further accentuates the discomfort of facing the gap separating the very wealthy from those who, without the same luck, survive in precarious conditions.
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> *(Icaro, p. 8, Sept/Oct, 1988)*

I was relieved to discover, on reading further, that the victims of this heretofore concealed syndrome are now being helped to overcome their "sense of uselessness". A millionaire (and presumably a victim of the disease) from San Francisco has started organising seminars and weekend retreats for the wealthy sufferers. These groups are spreading throughout the United States.

I read this article on my way to the Seventh International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect in Rio de Janeiro (September 1988) where I was to deliver a paper. "What an extraordinary place to hold a conference on child abuse" was the general reaction from friends and colleagues to news of where I was going. Not a bad place, though, to look at the gap separating the wealthy from those who ". . . without the same luck, survive in precarious conditions", as *Icaro* so delicately described the situation.

Rio is frequently claimed to be the most beautiful city in the world. The pictures of the Sugar Loaf Mountain are as familiar as the images of the Taj Mahal. Corcovado is the other big attraction and provides the other stunning view of Guanabara Bay. The huge statue of Christ is said to be welcoming the visitor to the city. When the Portuguese sailed into Guanabara Bay at the beginning of the 16th century, the setting must have been overwhelmingly beautiful. Now, some of that beauty is smothered in smog for much of the time and some of the hills are covered in *favelas* (shanty towns). The beaches with names famous throughout the world (Flamengo, Copacabana and Ipanema) are not the safest places to be if you want to keep your possessions.

The conference was the seventh organised by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), an organisation founded in 1977 according to its charter in order to:

> . . . prevent cruelty to children in every nation where cruelty occurs in the form of abuse, neglect or exploitation and thus to enable the children of the world to develop physically, mentally and socially in a healthy and normal manner.

The Chairman of the Congress Committee, Professor Jose Raimundo da Silva Lippi, set the scene in welcoming participants:

> Brazil is a developing country which has a generous soil and a people striving to reach its richness. The children are victims of this process and they are waiting for our help.

The Congress was held at the Nacional Hotel Convention Centre within sight of one of Rio's largest *favelas*, and home to quarter of a million people, precariously perched on the side of a hill. The Nacional is also just around the corner from Rio's famous Ipanema beach, and nearby are rows of millionaire's apartments with guards on the doors. Affluenza arouses envy, after all.

The highlight of the opening ceremony for me (and for many others, I am sure) was the personal, passionate speech by the Conference chairman, Professor Lippi. In welcoming 726 delegates from around the world, and using the phrase "I am my childhood", Professor Lippi put himself forward as living proof that poverty and abuse will not always prevent a fruitful adulthood, for he himself was the product of a childhood spent in institutions.

According to Professor Lippi, at least six million children in Brazil would be abused in 1988, and every 20 minutes a child under four years of age dies of malnutrition. His speech was accompanied by slides of child labour in Brazil, a country Lippi described as too rich to have these problems. Lippi blamed materialistic values, held at the expense of true leadership, true human development. He then explained that he recaptures the true beauty of childhood that he lost in his own deprived upbringing through his work in the field of child abuse and neglect.

At least three million children, between five and twelve years old, are said to be working in Brazil. An International Confederation of Free Trade Unions report, *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, describes how children can be seen at work all over the world:

> They work in underground mines. They are sold into domestic service. They labour in pesticide-soaked fields, work in small industrial workshops, sweat it out in textile mills . . . The list of jobs they do is endless. The hours they put in are long, their wages either non-existent or unbelievably low.
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> *(Breaking Down the Wall of Silence: 1)*

According to the report, poverty will continue to force children to look for jobs to help feed their families and, eager for quick profits, employers will continue to employ them. The report describes how children are used to reduce adult wages, and how child labour disrupts family life:

> Children are forced to abandon childhood permanently . . . Even more seriously, by beginning work too early — before they have acquired the necessary training and strength — child workers destroy their chances of becoming energetic, healthy and skilful adult workers. Children who begin to work too early often find themselves without jobs as adults. They are often too unhealthy, tired or unskilled to succeed in the world of adult workers.
>
> *(Breaking Down the Wall of Silence: 1)*

Professor Lippi's speech required personal courage and, presumably, political courage. Speaking out on such issues in South America is never a risk-free exercise. Other speeches at the opening ceremony were more circumspect about the problems in Brazil. A speaker from UNICEF compared the abuse suffered by children on the streets (please let us not call them "street kids") and children who spend years in large institutions. He poetically described street children as "the sons and daughters of ignorance and unconcern".

Street children and child labour were but two of several sub-themes of the conference and appropriately so, for a walk away from the Hotel Nacional brings you face-to-face with these problems. South American countries, like Brazil, and other so-called developing nations, face the problems of the poorer as well as those of the richer countries. Problems that are hard for us to comprehend.

Information was available at the conference from the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, a group who formed to recover children who "disappeared" in Argentina. These women described themselves

as having a double search, calling for the return of their grandchildren and those children's parents — the grandmother's own children. The military dictatorship kidnapped parents with their children, some children were left orphans when their parents were murdered at the hands of the regime, other children were born in prison camps and removed.

The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo searched orphanages, juvenile courts, and children's homes in their attempts to have their grandchildren returned to them *(Missing Children,* 1988).

Some children are lost in other, equally pointless ways. Press reports have described "train surfing" a dangerous and sometimes fatal new sport in Rio, in which children will stand on top of fast commuter trains and pretend they are surfing. Dodging the 3000 volt overhead cables, they attempt to keep their balance and avoid the potentially fatal falls. One hundred and ninety children were said to have died in the 18 months up to the time of the conference.

Some children, it seems, die for telling the truth. *Pixote* is a film that was shown in Australia recently. The true story of an eight year old boy who escaped from a children's prison and got caught up in street gangs in Rio that ran drugs and prostitution rackets. According to the *ISPCAN Newsletter,* the star of the film, a twelve year old, was later shot dead for exposing the seamy side of Rio.

Such stories are overwhelming in their pain and the temptation is to throw up one's hands in horror and walk away. Camus was appalled at the contrast between wealth and poverty in Rio back in 1949 and described how a woman was hit by a bus and left to bleed to death in the street (Camus, 1989). Such problems seem to be interminable and intractable, and are many miles from Australia.

It is said that 35,000 human beings die of hunger each day. Of these, two out of every three are children. As Bennett and George (quoted in Keneally, 1988) point out, this is the equivalent of an Hiroshima bomb every three days. They remind us that these events, repeated every day, are not accidents but political decisions. We play a part in those decisions. Ultimately, we play a part in those decisions wherever they are made. The connection is becoming more obvious every day.

Not long after the conference an adult died in Brazil. A not unusual occurrence when you consider that 48 people were murdered in my first 48 hours in Rio. This man, Francisco Mendes, was also murdered. Mendes led an alliance of Indians and rubber trappers in an attempt to protect the Amazon forests.

The Amazon forests of Brazil are being turned into desert in order to feed the insatiable appetites of the rich parts of the world for tropical hardwoods. The rich part of the world also encourage the clearing of the forests in order to keep American hamburgers cheap *(Radford, 1989)* and to provide cheap pig iron for Europe *(Clover, 1988).* No doubt some of the trees are used to make paper to print articles on affluenza.

As the forests are razed the world's climate will change, Professor Lippi's generous soil will be washed away, and the sea is expected to rise. According to Radford (1989), the sea will cover the beach at Copacabana in the next 40 years. In that case, the Hotel Nacional, the setting for the conference, and the nearby millionares' apartments will be gone. The hills on which the *favelas* (shanty towns) now precariously stand, will still be there. Perhaps we should be making these *favelas* more comfortable before we all have to move into them. Perhaps the rich, chronic sufferers of affluenza, can overcome their "sense of uselessness" by laying the foundations. Stranger things have happened. After all, "there's nowt so queer as folk".

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HISTORY OF THE EMBLEM OF THE ASSOCIATION

The emblem which we have adopted is the result of a schematizacion of a drawing made by a girl of five years in Brazil. This girl, from a humble neighbourhood of San Pablo, Brazil was a pupil of Anita, the daughter of Reverend James Wright, president of CLAMOR (Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Southern Cone).

Her drawing seemed to us a poem of light rose colours, with freshness and happy naivete. The reality of a little girl smiling in rose colours although her reality was very grim.

Nothing seemed better then than to use it schematized as the emblem of our organisation, which is searching for disappeared children who constantly smile at those who have deprived them of everything: family, identity, liberty.

Purity, a smile, a naive scribbling, in spite of the pain, the torture, death, horror.

GRANDMOTHERS OF PLAZA DE MAYO

Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, Corrientes 3284, 4H, 1193 Buenos Aires, Argentina.