



Writings & Essays

Parallel Universes

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Another world. We are only a few minutes drive from the city, but already on the edge of civilization. Mauricio is driving the van he uses to deliver food and clothes to the people he helps, a retired architect inspired by the Little Brothers of Jesus who now spends half his time at the favella. He is impassioned, dramatic. We bump along uncomfortably up the road as the green hills of Minas display postcard beauty. No tourists come here. At the top, we park by a large white cross erected on the spot where, in 1986, the tortured bodies of three boys, two 14 and one 16 years old, had been found laid out mockingly in a circle. The police had tried to extract the names of their bosses in the traffico, the drug trade. They had taken them to this beautiful, quiet place where their screams would not be heard.

Mauricio tells me how the police had learned these methods during the years of Brazil's military dictatorship. After the threat of land reform had passed and the country returned to democracy, police corruption and violence continued to drive an ever-wider wedge between law and justice. I realise how difficult it is to imagine such a fundamental gap in social trust. As the poor from the north-east began to migrate south looking for work, the favellas formed, mirror images, parallel universes beside the cities they descended on and infiltrated. But until the eighties, the favellas were seen as romantic places. The young of the middle class went there for real samba, for carnevale, for evenings out. Now they come just to buy their drugs. Even today, after they came of age in the drug era, the favellas themselves look magical at night, at a

safe distance, as their lights sparkle up and down the hillsides. But these worlds turn sinister when dark falls. Last year I was visiting a meditation group in a favella in Rio. As the afternoon shadows lengthened, the priest asked us if we would be disturbed when the evening shooting started soon after mass. He saw my companions' look of fear and suggested that we leave then and advised us to keep the lights on inside the car as we drove out.

Brazilians are not a violent people. Their history has few wars. They like to make their living doing what they most like to do. They love music, ideas and conversation, religion in various syncretistic forms, the beach and, of course, futebol. A film like "City of God" captures something of the tragic self-contradictions of this world of multiple universes. A people impassioned with life and celebration, sensual and spiritual, their music and sport transcend racial and social divisions. Yet they have got used to hearing of the shootings of children, and of police helicopters swooping down in the favellas spraying bullets into the crowded streets. The poor were once an object of pity and charity; now they are feared and the worlds fly further and more dangerously apart.

We join hands around the cross and pray for the boys killed there and for all who suffer alone and unheard. It seems some consolation, some sign of giving meaning to those young wasted, pain-filled lives. But as we drive away, I speak with a priest who has spent the past 28 years living in the favella. Unlike Mauricio, he is quiet and deep.

He has no solutions, no dreams; the comforting sense of consolation dissolves. His hope is found just in being present to the victims of this crazy universe of drugs, poverty and violence. When he hears of someone having being arrested, he goes down and sits in the police station. Every hour or so he gets up and asks the police for an update. It lets them know that their prisoner has a name and a friend. Does it help that he is a priest? He smiles and says it is better the police don't know that he is.

Mauricio leads us down a steep dirt track past cinder-block houses to one that he built over three Saturdays. Each of these poor dwellings surrounded by garbage is a dream come true. Patricia greets us at the door of her house, a beautiful but worn 30 year-old who had been abandoned as a child by her mother and grew up on the streets. She gave birth to the first of her own three children on the street. Miraculously, she met a man who accepted her, her child and stayed with her. Even more miraculously Mauricio found them and helped lift them into a better world. She tells her story with dignity. Making soap brings a few reals. Her husband leaves each morning, like the labourers in the parable, to find or not find work. She does not like being dependent on Mauricio for help but she often has to sell the money for the soap-making materials to feed the children. It is much better than the streets. She has a tap and a fridge and a magnet of Mickey Mouse on the fridge door. There was more hope but not much. I wonder if her children will avoid the temptation when they see the drug dealers, who trade openly on the streets, flash their money at them and offer an easy and quick way to a better world.

We take a picture with Patricia, which she enjoys, and then drive back to the city. We meet with the Archbishop, have a pizza, say vespers, give an

evening talk at the university. The next morning in the paper I see a photo of a 14 year old Palestinian boy, a foiled suicide bomber. He is kneeling, stripped, terrified under the guns of Israeli soldiers. His posture is just like that of Christ in Massacio's painting of the Baptism. Something it is very hard to define unites the universes.

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