

## Guilherme Boulos: Struggles of the Roofless - Interview by Mario Sergio Conti

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[extracts from]

*Question. As a coordinator of Brazil's homeless workers, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto, you are also a leading figure in the Party of Socialism and Liberty, one of the most dynamic sections of the Brazilian left outside the PT (Workers' Party). As psol candidate in the November 2020 São Paulo mayoral election, you won over 40 per cent in the second round—some 2 million votes. Could you start by telling us about your background and political formation?*

*Answer.* I was born in São Paulo in 1982, into a middle-class family. My father's family background is Lebanese, my mother's family is from Brazil's Northeast. My parents are both doctors and teach at the University of São Paulo. They were political, with progressive ideas—they work in Brazil's public-health sector, the sus, and always vote for the left—but not militants. That background gave me opportunities that most Brazilians lack. I didn't have to start working in my teens; instead I was able to dedicate myself to my studies, to have access to books and, later on, to get a good university education.

My militancy began at a pretty young age. I would say it sprang from two sources. First, from my sense of indignation: in Brazil, it is enough to have eyes to be indignant about the gaping inequalities here. São Paulo, in particular, is a deeply segregated city, full of contradictions—on the one hand, a city of extreme wealth, where the bulk of Brazil's gdp is concentrated; and on the other, of extreme poverty, of people living on the streets, of millions out of work or under-employed. This troubled me, it was like a call to action.

And second, my militancy came from reading, which led me, like many young people, to the left. I joined the youth wing of the Brazilian Communist Party when I was sixteen, while still studying at a fee-paying school. Then I moved to a state school, as a political choice, feeling that my commitment would make more sense in a working-class environment—it would be more coherent in terms of the positions I was coming to defend. At the new school, I worked with the other kids to fight for better teaching conditions. We organized groups—study groups, groups to demand a voice for students in the school board's decisions. One time we organized a strike, when the school tried to impose school uniforms, but without giving the students the means to buy them—their families had no money. One day, the school barred entry to those not wearing a uniform. So we organized a student strike and succeeded in getting the rule reversed.

*Q. Could you describe how the Communist Party functioned?*

*A.* When I joined, in 1997, the pcb had just been through a devastating split. It was founded in 1922, and for decades, up to the military coup of 1964, it was the hegemonic force on the Brazilian left. From the coup through to the 1980s, it was still an important reference point. With the restoration of democracy, it began to adopt increasingly moderate positions, until eventually the leadership changed the Party's name and, in effect, refounded it as a different party altogether. A minority of members tried to maintain a formation in the tradition of the pcb. By the time I joined, it was a small organization, and the youth wing, the ujc, was even smaller. We were trying to rebuild a fighting party.

*Q. Why did you leave?*

A. I began to see the contradiction between the doctrinal position of the Party, speaking in the name of ‘the people’, and its not being willing to build something with the workers themselves. It was a vanguardist idea, detached from reality. I began to understand that if we wanted to work towards a broad social transformation, it was more coherent to build something that directly involved the popular layers. It wasn’t just my decision. There was a group of us in the ujc and we left it together. We had a period of discussion about what to do next—not everyone took the same path. Some of us made the decision to join the mtst, the struggle of the sem teto—those without a roof—because it expressed the extreme of Brazilian poverty: those without even a place to rest their head. Did you help to create the mtst, or was it already in existence?

It was already in existence—we joined in 2001. The mtst had been set up in 1997 by a group of militants from the Movimento Sem Terra (mst), the rural landless workers’ movement, who saw the need to go beyond the countryside and organize in the cities—today, 87 per cent of the Brazilian population is urbanized. From that grew the work of the mtst. I first got involved by going along to one of the mtst occupations and helping to carry out political education sessions there, having discussions with the militants. And from that time on, I got more and more involved, to the point of living in one of the occupation sites. I was twenty years old at that point.

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*Q. How is the mtst organized?*

A. It is both fluid and centralized. In this sense, it is quite similar to the mst, the Landless Workers’ Movement. Fluid because, to the extent that the movement consists of occupying land, militants get their training through practice, in discussions that result in immediate actions. The movement is open to those who get involved in it. There are countless people who are now in the leadership of the mtst who at first were only fighting to have a place to live. They join the occupations with their little bit of tarpaulin, and they quickly turn into militants. It’s a degree of organizational openness that’s inconceivable in a centralized party. At the same time, because it is a fighting organization, it needs centralization and discipline. The mtst lives in a daily confrontation; it is constantly up against the police, the government, the owners of land earmarked for real-estate speculation. There are risks of infiltration by provocateurs, by people who want to occupy a piece of land and then resell it for profit, people linked to organized crime, by militia members. It is a direct confrontation, which requires planning and organization because we are up against an array of local and territorial power structures.

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*Q. As well as this political work, you went on to study psychology and became a psychoanalyst. Did you have personal motivations for doing so? Do you think there is a correlation between mental-health issues and the material deprivations suffered by working-class people?*

A. There was a personal interest, since I’d had depressive symptoms in my early youth. But what led me to psychoanalysis was my experience in Argentina with the piquetero movement in 2001/2. I spent a month there, during the upsurge of the piqueteros—a movement of the unemployed, organized territorially, a bit like the mtst. Their slogan was, ‘The barrio is the new factory.’ The piqueteros were among those responsible for the overthrow of three Argentine presidents and two interim ones within the space of a few months. I was in Argentina just after the Pueyrredón Bridge massacre in Buenos Aires, where two militants were murdered at a blockade.

I went to a neighbourhood on the periphery of Buenos Aires where there was a meeting they called a 'reflection group'. It was coordinated by two psychoanalysts who brought people together in a circle and created an environment for listening—listening to people who had never been listened to before. They had just lived through traumatic situations, like being made redundant and evicted from their homes; or they had lost their partners, or seen their families destroyed. I will never forget that: for the power, for the strength that was present there. It was a catharsis that brought forth all the experience of suffering, of humiliation, of every sort of oppression and violence that people had lived through. I left convinced of the potential of psychoanalysis for the transformation of people, of their bodies. And of the need for procedures like this to reach the base of society, the excluded, to help them take their destiny into their own hands, with the support of the community. It was a tool for those who couldn't afford to pay for psychological treatment. I came back from Argentina and started studying psychoanalysis.

Another thing that intrigued me, when I went to live in an mtst occupation, was something that I heard said again and again, in different ways. I remember the first time, listening to a comrade who was coordinating a community kitchen. She said that this was a space for sharing, for coexistence, for taking root. It was the type of space that had been lost in the overwhelming dynamics of urban capitalism. In the occupation people talked, recounted their cases, their stories, explained how they had ended up there, took steps of their own. She said that, before coming to the occupation, she had been living with relatives, dependent on their hospitality. She was diagnosed with severe depression and ended up taking several psychiatric medications—she couldn't even get out of bed. She was driven to the mtst occupation by economic conditions, the precarious situation in which she lived. But once there, she told me, 'I threw the medicines away because I didn't need them anymore.' That might sound naive. But, no—at different occupations, from different people, I heard the same narrative.

Through study and research, I tried to understand what this meant. My master's thesis in psychiatry is about the correlation between mental suffering, poverty and collective organizations. I could begin to understand, with psychoanalysis, how far situations of humiliation, of material and social deprivation, helplessness, unemployment, family breakdown, an environment of violence or loneliness, how all of this is linked to psychological suffering, especially depression. Depression does not only affect the middle class, far from it. It hits the dispossessed. Yet on the other hand, when these people feel part of a group, when they are no longer alone, when they feel important to others, acts of solidarity serve equally as acts of healing. Commitment and collective projects are good for people on a psychological level. There is no doubt that unemployment, homelessness, violence and humiliation are causes of psychological and subjective breakdown. And coexistence, bonds of community, can help rebuild subjectivities that have been ravaged by barbarism, by the urban dynamics in which people are isolated and lost in the middle of an anonymous crowd.

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