

Ties without 'us':

family life, community conflicts and religious journeys¹

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When Marie, Helena and Charles enrolled their children in a private school in the Parisian suburbs, they were searching for what they had long felt to be absent from the French public school system: they yearned for their children to have an education that valued individuality, something that would include, naturally, the cultivation of an artistic sensibility and philosophical reflection within a welcoming environment, guided by the ideal of liberty. According to the parents, the reasons for making this choice were mostly ignored by those responsible for public education in the country. Over-crowded classrooms, bureaucracy and the excesses produced by centralization and authoritarian management were some of the more obvious problems. Unlike those sending their children to private school in the past, they had not rejected public education for failing in its larger objectives – namely, integrating individuals into the French nation and ensuring they shared its secular, rational and republican values, at variance with religious principles.

The historical opposition between public and private teaching in French society centred on the ideal of assimilating everyone into values capable of unifying the nation and promoted by the French State: that is, social mobility and cultural uniformity in the name of a citizenship based on universal rights. French public schooling was constituted as a value promoted by the State in opposition to Catholic thought, taken to be antagonistic to the liberation from the constraints imposed by conservative religious morality. However, it was not these principles – or more precisely, the antagonism

¹ This text is a translation from portuguese of a paper published in Duarte, Luiz Fernando (ed.), *Familia e Religião*, Rio de Janeiro, Contracapa, 2007.

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between them – which guided these parents.

Instead, what they wanted was an ‘openness’ to existential viewpoints critical of the instrumental rationality that they judged to be pervasive in public schools and contemporary western societies, an ‘openness’ that went beyond the traditional antagonism present in French society. The option to send their children into private education stemmed from the importance these parents attached to the school’s commitment to improving the individual – for them, a legitimate ambition free of the national ideology and its republican project.

They decided on a school whose renowned eccentricity was matched by the glowing endorsements from friends and acquaintances, who emphasized the enthusiasm, curiosity and intellectual performance of its pupils and teachers. In a sense, the physical facilities summed up the uniqueness of what the school had to offer: in an ancient castle, painted pink and located on top of a hill, the school provided accommodation for its teaching staff in a communitarian space designed to cultivate a form of learning free of institutional constraints. This space exuded an aura of creativity, open displays of affection and the boundless cultivation of knowledge. One of the parents interviewed by myself repeated a verdict I had heard elsewhere: public schools met the needs of their teachers and not the demands of their children and youngsters. Thus, it was somewhat of a shock for most of the parents when they suddenly learnt that the school director had been arrested, accused of siphoning off money and being the head of a religious sect.³

The school’s public image transformed to the public audience into that of a closed group, a sect based ‘community’ that worked to undermine the freedom and autonomy of individuals. A short while after leaving custody, the director fuelled the arguments of his enemies and confirmed their worst suspicions: faced by mounting debts, he hatched an escape plan which included taking all the students and some of the parents to the North Africa where he planned to set up a school-community-theatre. Few parents remained in the project. The school had indeed transformed into a religious sect in the eyes of public opinion and the State. Instead of the liberating ‘opening up’ provided by science and the arts, the parents had unwittingly

3 I am using the term “sect”(secte in french) instead of the more usual english “cult” to identify the new religious movements which are not considered as the historically recognized churches in France (catholicism, protestantism, judaism and islam). I maintain this term to emphasize the specific value of “laïcité” in France.

tingly found a guru bent on subjecting the students, contrary to any project of freeing their minds.

This text looks to analyze not only the drama experienced by some of these parents in confronting their own disappointment and that of their children, but also their doubts and ambivalence concerning 'sect' and 'communitarian' ways of life in the education of their children and youngsters. What would really be good for them? What values should parents transmit, particularly in terms of the children's relations with family and wider society?

School, family and secularism: continuities and changes

In fact, the choice made by these parents to send their children to an 'alternative school' occurred in a fairly specific context. At the moment in question, the French media was tireless in publicizing a stream of alarming diagnoses and prognoses, issued by the State and various associations, on the risks faced by young people as the preferential 'victims' of sects – new sellers of dreams and illusions who tried especially to infiltrate the spaces in which youngsters socialized. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a consensus was more or less reached on the social risk entailed by the new religious sects then emerging in French society. The appeals for care and vigilance – part of a State policy for preventing these sects from taking root – were primarily aimed at two main targets: 'families' and, within these, the children or 'weakest' members. Thus in the French national imaginary, a split formed between two social groupings quarreling over their capacity to socialize individuals and provide a source of affective relations: *families* and *sects*. The victory of sects in winning over a new follower was seen to be primarily at the cost of the family, the most important group of belonging of every individual, as well as the one most concerned with his or her long-term well-being.

In France, the associations that sprang up to defend the family from the sects have had 'cells' distributed throughout the country since the 1990s. These receive numerous phone calls from parents, grandparents or spouses asking whether the particular behaviour of one of their family members is a sign of the person's entry into a sect. Normally, the activists working for these associations respond by advising the family to be watchful and look carefully for any tell-tale change in habits. As part of this 'movement in defence of society,' the aim was to strengthen the social institutions most

vulnerable to the sects, especially those responsible for educating children (see Giumbelli 2002; Birman 2000, 2004). Schools and families were therefore urged to take part in this war, which involved drastic measures to suppress the emergence of sects in schools, as well as an appeal to parents, students and teachers to remain constantly on the look out for any strange behaviour among their children and peers, resorting, where necessary, to the surveillance of the State.

From the second half of the 19th century to the First World War, the public school and the family developed in France as essentially competing institutions within a predominantly Catholic context (see Mona Ozouf 1982). In the private domain, families defended values already expelled from the public sphere: these values were transmitted by parishes in clear opposition to the principles of the Republic. In the context of this conflict, according to the prevailing historiography, the French public school comprised the principle means of removing youths from the nefarious influence of the Catholic Church and the ‘particularism’ of its family-based cultures, offering them an educational space focused on republican values, taken as universal. According to this program, the public school – French society’s largest source of integration, capable of equalizing and homogenizing youngsters coming from different groups of belonging, whether religious or ethnic – would transform the individual into a future citizen (Bauberot 1997, 2004; Ozouf 1982; Schnapper 1991; Willaime 1993).

In the mainstream narratives concerning the constitution of French *laïcité* or secularism, the school emerges as a compliment to the education offered in Catholic families, since both institutions remained in tune with religious values otherwise deemed incompatible with the public sphere. According to an interesting work by Jean Baubérot (2004), at least until the 1914 War and the end of the ‘Belle Époque,’ the *mothers of families* were seen as ‘natural’ allies of the Catholic faith, since in general they were held under the spell of the priests, whose catechism undermined the efforts of more enlightened public men committed to the process of liberating society. At this moment supporters of the *Ancien Régime* linked to the Catholic Church, clashed violently with the anti-clerical republicans, frequently influenced by freemasonry (see Ozouf 1982). As is well known, this process was to be achieved by running society in accordance with the values of *Reason* and the *Republic*: the main enemy of equality, liberty and fraternity were the forms of domination closely associated with religious

obscurantism. According to this Enlightenment agenda, the maternal link in this evolutive history was a stumbling point, a barricade constructed through affect with potential mystical undertones that would impede the spread of the values of reason promoted by men in the public sphere.

In other words, the clash between the liberating forces of progress and those of conservatism and the religious traditions was also waged in the domestic sphere, where the Church dominated and women reined, in contrast to the public, male and secular sphere. As a result, until the 20th century, the education of women was frequently justified as a necessity in order to extend the values of the Republic, allowing them to penetrate social spaces that had so far remained impervious.

The perils of today

After the adoption of the Law of March 1882, which made secular public education compulsory, the confrontations gradually dwindled until the separation of Church and State became definitive with implementation of the 1905 Law. Three years later, the French episcopacy issued a declaration pledging its neutrality in relation to lay schools (Ozouf 1982).

Obviously, the identity differences claimed and/or attributed to women and diverse social groups are no longer the same, just as the contexts in which the discussion of the notion of *laïcité* took place have significantly altered. Nowadays, the political debates and positions no longer focus on the opposition between Church and State, but between ‘sects’ on one side and the State and established religions on the other. Still, these more recent debates can be seen to retain various oppositions that helped shape the historical field giving rise to modernity: magic and reason, charisma and routine, community and society, public domain and private domain – all contrasting pairs that have acted as a constant refrain in modernity’s conflicts.

Echoing this philosophical tradition, one of the most intense discussions among sociologists in France during the 1990s was over the status of these ‘new types’ of beliefs and religious groups: were they an index of the re-enchancement of post-modern societies, or actually a disenchantment of the world, despite their religious ‘clothing’? The emptying of traditional religious institutions, namely the ‘churches,’ meant one of two things: either it indicated the individual’s ‘loss of reference points,’ leading him or her to embark

on 'quests' that could become sect-based, although they could end up in traditional religious universes; or it corresponded to a rupture with modernity without any later 'recomposition' (see Françoise Champion 1999 and Daniele Hervieu-Leger 1993, 2001). Whatever the case, both of these interpretative possibilities effectively recognized the increased presence of a 'magical' or 'charismatic' – and apparently deformed and pervasive – religiosity that had shaken the more rationalized and consolidated modes of religious practice.

In these 'new types' of groups, the resurgent interest in magic has been accompanied by a relative dissolution of the boundaries between the public and private, the worldly and other-worldly, as well as the disqualification of the 'church' model in favour of 'emotional communities' guided by 'charisma.' At the end of the 1960s, the new 'oriental' religious groups began to form and a dozen years later the first movement opposing these sects emerged. The groups identified as sects were the first to awaken the hostility of traditionally Catholic families. The controversies that subsequently prompted the war on sects involved two main accusations that sometimes contradicted and at other times complimented each other: firstly, the sects supposedly used non-ordinary, technologically advanced and efficient means (like brain washing) to induce the submission of their followers; and/or secondly, by means of magic tricks and chanted mantras from the gurus, they used ingenious, yet false, methods of provoking illusions. The important fact was that, whether due to sophisticated techniques or the illusion created by magic tricks – though frequently because of both – they provided French youngsters with the means to turn against their families and wider society.

A powerful movement with wide media support was organized to expose the harm provoked by the sects, formed by critics coming from traditional Catholicism and republican rationalism alike. Indeed, both ended up defending churches free of 'charismatic' practices as 'true religions' in contrast to the sects. This movement, allied with sectors of the State, related the sect phenomenon to 'primitive' traits coming from the exterior, impelled by market forces, that were increasingly penetrating the developed nations, encountering a fertile terrain with people disaffected with the disenchanting western world. Magicians from every periphery, armed by the forces of globalization, were coming in droves to Europe and using all their wiles to trick, seduce and subject those who approached their 'communities.'

At the same time, however, the identification of the sects with obscu-

rantist residues, reactivated with the disenchantment of the world and globalization, to some extent meant publicizing the reasons why these gurus could be so persuasive; in other words, it amounted to a public recognition of their specific attractions and powers. The 'romantic' and 'alternative' side of the new religious groups was potentially highly alluring, in the same way, in fact, as modern movements like spiritism, occultism and esotericism, seen to provide access to a dimension of the world still to be explored.

Peter Pels (2003) argues against previous theories of modernity that identified certain practices found in contemporary European societies as elements supposedly exterior to modernity itself, residues of a primitivism to be vanquished by the development of capitalism. According to Pels, anthropologists were the most important architects of these forms of translation, which made the 'apparently irrational' practices of their societies of origin, including things like magic, into models capable of translating the 'other' of the societies they studied. Thus, in analyzing magic's relations with modernity, Pels suggests that religious movements and some contemporary theoretical approaches amount to attempts to explore the 'underside' of rationality, which, as a result, potentialize the invisible and/or occult forces that are otherwise subject to exclusion and denunciation:

"For some, the most radical form of critique was one that pretended to reverse centuries of Western disrespect by arguing for the real or potential truth of magical, witchcraft, or shamanic practices, critiques that could be taken up in the countercultural, New Age celebrations of alternative perceptions of the world... This revival of the romantic celebration of separate, alternative or visionary realities continues to this day in what can be called a postmodern form..." (Pels 2003:14)

Consequently, the opposition between families and cults was concretized in such a way that the former were taken to be a social institution with more resources – especially symbolic and affective – than the latter, meaning they were able to compete with the 'warmth' of the community life found in the cults. The family therefore ceased to be perceived as the 'pole' of obscurantism and became instead the victim of the latter, insofar as the cults 'stole' youngsters for their community life – children whose parents dreamed of successfully integrating them in wider society. Those children with a religious upbringing would have belonged to their parents' church and, as at

home, educated in line with a moral code that combined both secular and religious values – sets of values belonging to a cultural background shared by society as a whole. Perhaps for this reason, the family was not only considered the social institution best prepared to shelter individuals from the risk posed by the sects, but also the institution most under threat from the same. Families had therefore become ‘natural allies’ of the State in warding off the danger assailing both. Likewise, the ‘rupture’ of an individual’s family ties as a result of joining a sect, frequently perceived as a closed community, a ‘new family,’ became transformed into a danger to French society as a whole. The sect was an indicator at domestic level of what corresponded at national level to the loss of the sect member’s loyalty to the nation. Let us return, though, to the case of the school.

Alternative values and shared objectives?

The families of the children reacted very slowly and adversely to the accusations that began to hover over the school as a *sect*. Some refused to accept the accusation and took the risk of sending their children abroad to form a new community with the former school director. Others criticized the sectarianism in the school without agreeing with the ethos – to their minds, excessively Catholic and moralist – of the main anti-cult association, the Association in Defence of the Family and the Individual (ADFI). Most people, though, accepted the evidence mounted against the school and opposed the new guru.

However, the interviewed parents did not share the same level of conviction displayed by the militants opposing sects in general. In my view, this difference was due, at least in this case, to the fact that they had a relatively explicit affinity with the ‘alternative’ cultural and moral universe of the ‘sects’ in which the school was itself immersed. Thus the hesitations and doubts that surfaced concerning the school and its problems can be analyzed as part of the complex scenario that implicate their choices, both personal and political, in the broader context of contemporary European societies. In this scenario, what surfaced were their ambivalences concerning established institutions and their difficulties in assuming what would be part of their opposite: namely, community life and the valorization of individual trajectories, in contrast to the loss of ancient ideals associated with the domains of politics and their more well-known utopias.

In a sense, the parents actually appeared to value what was seen as the biggest problem posed by the sects: the capacity of their leaders to galvanize the people around them, assimilating them into a collective project whose ideals were accompanied by an unconventional and apparently liberating style. For some people, the innovative experience of Summerhill and the libertarian values of the 1960s resurfaced in the ideal pursued by this educational project in the 1990s.

These parents have an evident empathy, therefore, with the contemporary variations of the counter-culture: communitarian experiences and oriental religiosities; the weight given to subjective affinities in social relations; the distancing from, and distrust of, official institutions reproducing the values of the republican model, recognized churches and political institutions. For this reason, 'magic' and 'charisma' appeared, at least at first, as liberating instruments, just as the exotic traits cultivated by the school director were readily accepted as signs of positive counter-cultural values. In a way, the parents rejected, or at least tended to reject, the contractual and 'disenchanted' relations that directly and irrefutably interpellate the conscience of the individual as citizen, a subject with rights and duties – especially insofar as these relations are seen to be increasingly far removed from their ideal and disrespectful of the demands of individuals. Put otherwise, the distancing from these values combines with a shift towards lifestyles in which behavioural patterns linked to the private sphere acquire a renewed importance.

These parents therefore rejected a public education system that failed to value the child's subjectivity and expressivity. Diverging from the majority, they preferred to enrol their children at a private school where the use of 'non-traditional' sources and knowledge in teaching was combined with a strong emphasis on acquiring an expressive individualist ethos within a community setting – a qualitative individualism, as Simmel describes (1971) – antagonistic to the values central to the republican and secular integrationism defended in and by public schools. Acquiring the instruments of reason as a means of attaining the full autonomy of individuals is secondary, for these parents, to the development of the more expressive dimensions of individualism through the valorization of theatre, the arts and other subjective experimentations within the group.

The value given to this alternative educational project also implied a

degree of communitarianism in which parents, teachers and children were encouraged to discover their individual paths through affective and emotional involvement in the group. Hence, the school maintained a space of subjectivization that looked to minimize as far as possible a 'rational' and 'contractual' form of education, whether the latter meant following explicit rules or a rigid definition of the rights and duties of the group's members. In contrast, the school offered a warm environment, supposedly a continuation of the family and in contrast to the public sphere.

My research involved talks with parents some years after the event, during which they provided me with a kind of retrospective on their reactions at the time. How did their disillusionment with the school and its director come about? How did they try to understanding how they had been tricked and what had led them to accept the school director as a guru? These conversations were invariably lengthy and generally extremely interesting. Most of the parents I interviewed saw themselves as cultured and enlightened people, lovers of culture and comfortably off in financial terms, many of them working as independent professionals and employees of the State.

In examining these experiences, I concentrate on the statements of two mothers and the reflections of a friend who provided counsel and tried to help them during the crisis. The friend in question was able to intervene on double grounds: firstly, simply by being a 'friend;' secondly, by being a freemason working for a public authority, meaning he had more influence within the State's institutions than common citizens. His intervention affords us an insight into how this small 'alternative' universe actively mediated with those who represented values they were attempting to abandon. Moreover, it also allows us to comprehend the interventions of an individual who valorizes and attempts to follow the ideal model of the French individual, someone in whom rationality and the practice of citizenship combine in the form of a self-construction as a 'person-citizen,' a member of the French nation.

The ideal of autonomy and the search for spirituality

The 'community' and its affective ties, dominated by the charisma of its leader, formed the central thread of Helena's reflections, summed up in the following question: when and how are these kind of 'communities' able to be help or harm people?

Helena was the mother with whom I kept up the closest relationship. From our first contact, she stated in various ways her desire to distance herself from generic 'others:' 'normal' people 'integrated' into the 'system,' immersed in the mediocrity of established norms and overly obedient and submissive to them. She described herself as a 'revolted person' and original. According to her, this eccentricity partly derived from her 'mixed' family origins from different immigrations to France: "I've a Spanish father and an Algerian mother; my grandfather is Russian and my maternal grandmother a gypsy and Mongolian; my paternal grandmother, Breton with German Jewish blood." As though this were not enough, her son's father is Greek and his current Afghan partner. A 'small salad,' she said, when I asked, jokingly whether this is how one made 'stock' French people (*de souche*).

She told me how she had reacted when the news suddenly erupted about her son's school. The first scandal occurred when the director was arrested for having lost all the school's money in a casino. This 'fairly unconventional' form of fundraising she found 'amusing,' she said. Moreover, the director's incredibly charismatic personality had attracted her greatly. Just like her, he had liked to 'push the boundaries.' She also emphasized her admiration for the campaign conducted by the children and their parents to free the director, since they were defending a collective project, and the energy put into the campaign provided ample proof of the positive effects of this project on the children: "The children went on strike and took shifts to protest in front of the jail for the director's release. They did so impeccably, making no noise whatsoever: they planted themselves in front of the prison. It was a marvelous adventure and later the school classes restarted." All she had wanted from the school chosen for her son was for it to offer the essential: a true educational process of the person. Hence, her wish was:

for him [her son] to be inwardly autonomous, adaptable and capable of doing many different things. I'd like him to do things at his own pace, for him to develop at his own rate, and for him to have free will. I don't see life in the same way as other people: "You need to have a professional formation so you can pursue a career." No! What's needed is a happy child. To be happy in today's world – even if he wants to pursue a career, he may have problems whatever his schooling – he'll have to be adaptable. If his objective is firm, he'll get where he wants. If it isn't firm, he'll end up the same as everyone else. [...] I allow my son as many

openings as possible; afterwards it's up to him, his fate will be in his own hands, if he wants to join the rat race afterwards, he'll do so in his own way.

Her own career path showed that when qualifications become necessary, strong people like herself know how to fight and adapt to the institutional demands:

I never went to university, I always found school incredibly dull. Towards the end of high school, I told all the teachers that I wouldn't be back after the summer. I took a drama course for a few years and looked for work; I found a job, I went on tour and on returning took a few temporary jobs until I eventually left the theatre. [...] Afterwards, I had my son, I went to Greece and after coming back, knowing I had to work, I completed the equivalent of the Bac[calauréat]. So, I studied for two months from seven in the morning to midnight.

Her son spent a year at the school. In her descriptions of this period, she dwelt on the enthusiasm of the small collective that formed to rebuild the school after the director's release in the wake of parental pressure. At this moment, a more unified and enthusiastic group was created, she felt; a collective wholly dedicated to the educational project with a theatre as its central focus:

They [the children and teachers] constructed a theatre, stone by stone, there were no more courses or anything else; instead, the theatre was built. They would arrive, make sandwiches in the morning, he [my son] returned at night and they made this theatre. It was an absolutely fantastic atmosphere, and what happened afterwards, well, when it all began to fall apart, and even the atmosphere of the theatre was completely megalomaniac, everything was enormous, with giant columns, they did an amazing job [...] They put on a play in this theatre, a film, and when I watched the film, I saw the sect atmosphere surrounding that man [the director], surrounding everything [...] What is a sect? It's the moment when one human being and those around him possess the truth and this truth is incontestable. I think that's the basic definition: whether or not it's religious, there's a moment when truth becomes final and it's the end of the story: everything centres on one person. There was this problem of money and the devotion of three-quarters of the students and teachers. Complete devotion. I mean, I couldn't even say 'but...' Whoever said this, was against, they weren't with him anymore – and hearing this was impossible. The day I expressed a

doubt over one of the guru's actions, I turned into someone from the enemy clan [...] This happened overnight. When I next went to a meeting, the children turned their backs on me, the teachers barely said hello, since I was now from the enemy clan. I was still on the inside, I mean, but I began to be more observant; instead of being in favour, I became more vigilant.

Then the following developed:

There was a kind of mixture in which he [the guru] needed this devotion to live – I think he fed energetically off other people's devotion to him, and people fed off the energy that he emitted. They couldn't function without each other and this created a kind of bond [...]. He was a man with an enormous charisma. He looked like a mafia-type, his team too, in fact.

Helena describes a process of *energy exchange* – an unequal process given the direction of these flows and their single and exclusive pole of accumulation. Evaluating the 'bond' established with the guru, she calculated that his disciples 'lost' more energy than they 'gained.' The parents were unable to react since they had become captivated just as much as their children. However, the director offered them something they had been lacking until then: a means of expressing and dealing with their emotions. Helena remarked:

Many parents had no doubts, since he [the guru] had set up a theatre for the children and ran drama courses for the parents; these parents were people who had never expressed themselves physically, bodily, and now began to do so. They themselves were being recognized, they were happy, and they were manipulated like the rest.

The dependence of the parents therefore prevented them from realizing that they were being manipulated: in other words, a vicious circle was formed, which took hold primarily, she thought, because of the weakness of the people involved:

...people without mental resources [...] they were people who didn't know how to support their children either [...] I think we're living in a period lacking in spirituality. [...] I believe that the problem of sects is nowadays much stronger everywhere, it reflects this spiritual lack in people, who don't know how to pursue an autonomous spiritual quest.

Nonetheless, her son's reaction was quicker than her own. "When he said: 'I don't want you to lose any more money or energy on this school,' this reverberated inside me, as if the part of me capable of seeing more clearly had woken up. Suddenly, everything that was suspect and everything that once made me laugh became a serious issue."

In her terms, the *mechanism* that generates dependency is present in any social relationship. All relations naturally imply the above mentioned energy flows which lend them *form*. For her, man's essential values, present in the great religious systems, are permanently at risk of becoming deformed by mundane life.

Tolerance and relativism are essential for Helena. Usually, though, these values are not transmitted to everyone. They depend primarily on a personal quest and conquest, undertaken by the individual despite the institutions that block its growth and fruition. For Helena, the *quest attitude* is fundamental if the person is to escape social determination and benefit from relations that go beyond them:

For me, in terms of religion, I am in search, as far as possible, of religious values, since I have had many experiences that led me to ask myself about energy, about many paranormal experiences. So, there are moments when we ask ourselves if what's happening is normal. I carry out research and now count myself as someone who thinks that reincarnation is a probability, that believing in it or not isn't a problem. I'm constantly researching, an inner search.

Her spiritual quest remains in permanent tension with the communitarian spaces that offer certain forms of spiritual nourishment that she desires. She says that she took part for a while in a shamanism group where she learnt a fair amount from specialists who had studied with South American shamans. The shamanic training courses run by these specialists focus on what they learnt in the forests of Amazonia, a place she dreams of visiting. What they effectively teach are the "bases of this shamanism, the bases of shamanic work, whose objective is to find a shamanic expression that corresponds to our present-day society: So, we learn the basics, the basic techniques, and each of us must then look for the expression of the place where we are."

The individualization of the quest means that joining a group is always provisional, even where it involves a community directed by a *true master* who has no wish of being transformed into a guru. The non-conformism feeding

this search requires that the individual has the *spiritual strength* to avoid succumbing to society and its norms, something that she designates as a *closed community*. Escaping the 'institutional mechanisms' without acquiring 'spiritual strength' leads people to a new prison, a community that operates as a sect; that is, a *closed group* possessing a *single truth*.

She, naturally, did not want her son to 'fit into the mould,' *like everyone else* – that is, become someone *incapable of being himself*. In fact, it was not a question specific to 'cults' or 'religions,' but of relations of dependency and submission to others that can be found in any mode of institutional structuring, the pillars of each and every society. As Helena said, embarking on a spiritual quest poses difficulties, since many things conspire against people who fight for what they want: they can become the victims of those wishing to sell – at an abusive price – the techniques they have mastered, or become wrapped up in the power games found everywhere. Hence, losing money or freedom are inevitable risks. Although her contact with a Sufi master had been extremely interesting, she claimed: "I think what works best is when you search by yourself: group work doesn't suit me."

The masters are necessary, but only as long as you remain watchful and 'wary,' that is, adopt a subjective attitude acquired through learning and experience, the capacity to observe from a certain critical distance. Likewise, a degree of distance from family is advisable, since parents – and the school – frequently work against children's autonomy. Finally, the cultivation of self essentially involves learning to search for a spirituality that involves controlling your relations with others and the self-knowledge that allows you *to progress, to develop, to recapture one's energies* from natural sources without being robbed – in every sense – by the individuals making up the surrounding world. Helena thinks that she and her son knew how to move beyond the episode of the school guru. This event proved useful and once the adventure was over, he was able to enrol at another school immediately, receiving his high school certificate in due course without any problems.

The theme of personal autonomy and free will, omnipresent in the discussion on sects in French society, acquires a particular meaning in Helena's reflections. For her, autonomy is won by the individual *against all institutions*, all of them generally speaking oppressive and capable of smothering the subjective potential of people. Autonomy, however, can also be won from 'within' these institutions when there is no other option. There are, after all

the *masters*, those capable of transmitting ancestral knowledge derived from natural and paranormal forces. A master can teach the capacity to resist the competing attempts to capture by enabling an individual to acquire increasing control of their self.

Since the relationship between master and disciple is neither immune to the desires for power that traverse societies, nor to the normative character of the latter, and even less to the weaknesses of the people who need the protection of groups of belonging, Helena's ideal seems to be to ensure that her son develops into someone able to manage his social ties in an essentially provisional manner. Following his path alone, albeit punctuated by temporary membership of groups, will, she feels, favour his freedom and integrity as an individual.

The provisional nature of ties and the inconstancy of affects make up part of her ideal of personhood. The passage through various groups, including those teaching an Oriental or Amerindian knowledge she desires, may provide more shelter than the territories imagined by exoticism.

Helena, therefore, discovers in the West's 'others' the tools to construct her self and to criticize the different forms of submission she identifies in French society. For her, even the family is a group of choice and no more. In the final moments of the interview, she refers to the family she created for herself: "For me, family are the people who love you... There exists the technical family and the family of the heart," a claim undoubtedly fully in line with the ideals that she described and with the lifestyle she has chosen for herself. Before we concluded the interview, she revealed her intention of quitting her present job in the near future and earning a living from shamanic consultations and a small drama training group she had already assembled – one more step in living freely.

A mother against the sect

Marie was introduced to me by one of her friends, a young university employee who had attended one of my lectures on "the problem of sects in France." He contacted me and suggested I meet a friend of his, *a victim of the sects*, who had written a book on the drama experienced with her two children, both influenced by the 'school guru.' Marie presented herself as someone who worked in the culture area, an employee of a local council on the outskirts of Paris.

Married for the second time to a sociologist of a multinational company, Marie looks to cultivate a 'spiritual openness' which she recognizes and admires as a quality possessed by intellectuals and people linked to culture and the arts. Describing what had happened to her, she was quick to identify the former school director as a man with a special aura, sexy, always dressed in black at his castle... Subsequently, as the drama over the school unfolded, she began to see him as someone possessing malignant powers, a man capable in particular of sorcery; that is, of provoking harm to people against their will and conscience – something that had indeed happened to her and her two children. The guru was someone as dangerous as he was irresistible: he had an extraordinary propensity to seduce and dominate the people around him, something which obliged her to seek help and look for affective, intellectual and political reinforcements among friends, specialists and employees from all levels of the State, so that she could defeat him and recover her children from his clutches:

He had something very surprising, something that I had never felt in my life. I mean to say, he had a charismatic body, he emanated something truly... physical. From the moment he entered a place, there was a strong presence, more than empathic, you see it, highly charismatic. He created an atmosphere by saying very little (he wasn't talkative). He created some kind of sorcery... almost at the epidemical level.

The guru's extraordinary powers were also mentioned in passing by Helena. When he was arrested, people said he was able to use telepathy to control the teachers campaigning for his release. Helena, though, in contrast to Marie, did not find these powers so alarming. For her, they are within reach of all those who develop their spirituality and are essentially benign; at least when used by people who value personal autonomy and control the flux of energy (their own and that of others) in an appropriate way.

Marie's struggle to convince her children not to travel abroad with the guru was, therefore, pitched against the dominating power and evil charisma emitted by this figure, a power that she, working alone, was unable to neutralize. The fictionalized story that she wrote on her confrontation with the guru includes all the difficult moments she experienced in relation to her children, blamed squarely on the charisma of this strange Oriental sorcerer. Thus, the book narrates the difficulties involved in preventing them from travelling and, at the same time, her efforts to save them from the despair into which

they plunged on being separated from the guru who she was trying to neutralize or, preferably, destroy.

Her account focuses on the day-to-day life with her children, the latter fixated on the idea of embarking for Morocco, as well as her anguish when faced by the imminent loss of her family and the destruction of her own life. Her style of writing reproduces the narrative model dominant in the burgeoning literature on sects, where the plot frequently centres on families fighting with gurus for control of their children:

‘He’ won! Louis took out a passport, Quentin wants to take out his... I’ve been swallowed by a bottomless spiral of incomprehension. Now I’m truly angry. I’m going to fight and make sure this story explodes in the press. ‘He’ had no right. ‘He’ stuck a pin in the atlas. ‘He’ made the children believe that they were deciding their own lives in following him. These youngsters, I know them so well, I love them... I don’t sing, I chant from my minaret of horror, my control tower of anguish. ‘He’ won! I hate him!

The power of the gurus proved too much for her maternal resources. The charisma of such beings generates a seductive force that is almost impossible to control. Marie therefore found herself at the mercy of these destructive attacks that threatened to undermine her maternal powers entirely.

Her two children had been sent to the school in question following adaptation problems elsewhere, meaning they needed special care. Marie became completely enamoured of the guru when she noted just how much they were benefiting from his philosophical teachings and the school’s unique environment, where the master lived with his disciples. She even showed me the letter she had written in his defence when he was imprisoned. She took out debts to help rebuild the school and remained oblivious to the accusations until the moment the guru proposed that everyone leave for Morocco. At this point, she told me, she suddenly came to her senses and found herself caught up in the same fight cited everyday in the press: she was one of many other parents trying to save their children from a relation of total submission to a guru, frequently held abroad out of reach of their families. After learning that the power wielded by the guru, whose effects were draining all her energies, derived from a sect, she decided to look for help from people better qualified than herself to confront him.

Her search, different from that conducted by Helena, was not based on

an 'inner' voyage, a source of self-knowledge and emotional strengthening undertaken in the opposite direction to the forces dominating the individual in society. Rather, Marie's strategy was to assemble friends and important people in the public sphere who could defeat the sect's seductive power. In other words, she turned to the State to find the means of defending 'her' society and 'her' family from these 'outside' enemies. In her book, Marie spares no words in describing the evil influence of this individual on the French youngsters in his care:

Jean's father, a discreet and private man, occupies a position high up in one of the government ministries. He tolerated the growing desires of his wife and children as they became completely imprisoned by the school's game... He ended up with a string of debts because of the school and 'his' financial follies. His daughter was due to marry a former teacher of the school, one of the few who didn't follow 'him.' Jean's father mentioned his daughter's marriage and told me, somewhat amused and anxious at the same time, that she called her future husband *vous* and *monsieur*, as was customary in addressing all the school's teachers. We said to ourselves that 'he,' with 'his' mosaic of cultures, 'his' double nationality, 'his' genius on the verge of madness, had managed to spread the most archaic attitudes and behaviours of Morocco among the French youth, such as the young women's use of *vous* and *monsieur*...

Controlling the powers wielded by the sect depended on the guardians of French society, the anti-sect associations and the mobilization of the State in defence of the sect's victims.

Conscience and liberty

Among the various friends who helped her, Marie strongly recommended one in particular, a man who could provide me with a good overview of those who really know about the theme of sects in contemporary France. I took her advice and went to talk with Charles, a politely mannered freemason. During my short French experience, he was the second freemason to introduce himself to me proudly as someone morally concerned with combating the problem of the sects. I perceived that in both cases, freemasonry was closely connected with the fight against the cults, where the freemasons in fact claimed a special role: both men described themselves above all as lovers of human liberty and

dignity, meaning they were especially trained to combat these groups in defence of both families and the Republic itself.

A missionary zeal was still apparent in Marie's friend when I contacted him. Charles was around forty years old and worked as a cultural advisor for another local council in a small urban centre, also on the Parisian outskirts. During the interview, held in the mayor's office, the theme of individual liberty was continually mentioned. How to be free? How to avoid fitting 'in the mould' like everyone else? How to avoid the 'knee-jerk responses'? Being 'like everyone else' also meant having no kind of utopia, losing all idealism; in sum, conforming with the world as it presents itself. For this reason, he suggested, the 'search for utopias' can lead people along dangerous paths. It is precisely *those in search* who the gurus most prey upon. The narrow pathway between these two possible destinies, sect or institutional form, both sad and potentially dramatic, can only be journeyed successfully by those who *have already learnt to be free*.

Charles fought for an education in liberty. Somewhere between amused and astonished, I overheard him make the following slightly pompous declaration to a listener who had come from a long way off and was evidently deemed a long way from the values he himself nurtured:

I, I think that the more utopic you are, the more you need to be strong individually. This means that I, I'm what you would call a free man, I've a lengthy experience in the corridors of freemasonry, an environment that, at its best, is a personal school for self-development.

According to Charles, social life forces everyone in different ways to be "like everyone else." Husband, wife, boss, political party, all of them say, in effect: "You need to do this:"

So they leave you very little personal space, we become used to this environment where there's little personal room, and the day that you say you're not interested in knowing what God thinks, or Christ, the Pope and others, my boss and the rest of them end up defining a viewpoint and that becomes mine... my wife, my husband, it matters little, and you find yourself in situation of grave personal danger, because you've no answers anymore, or even ready-made replies...

His autonomy, which in this case is equivalent to "abandoning ready-made answers" and acquiring the capacity to think rationally, possesses an institutional haven that also provides the means of achieving it:

...when you work in freemasonry, it really is a kind of work, I would say, a first attempt at breaking free; in other words, when you enter a place where there are no more answers, no more established truths, it's up to you to reconstruct your own truths, knowing that, from one day to the next, you... It's true, you don't break with everything, [but] there's a mode of functioning in which we're obliged to listen to the Other's viewpoint. We are not allowed to interrupt him, for example, and you cannot intervene until he's finished speaking; we have to ask to speak and we must let the next person speak in turn. It's a process that's there to help build a capacity. But, in the end, if this is used by a guru, it can also be wielded to induce a dependency, because these processes are instruments and it all depends on how they are used.

This training school for the free man and, consequently, the citizen who is subject to rights and duties, the owner of a moral conscience, teaches its members to cultivate "a spiritual openness," learnt, however, within a context of republican values. It was in this environment that Charles became who he is: "My belonging to freemasonry rests on the values of the Republic: liberty, equality and fraternity [...] a dedication to absolute freedom of conscience, to good and to mutual respect."

Intellectual debate and an appreciation of the plurality of viewpoints were highlighted as part of his masonic training, which for him corresponded to the ideal regime of relations between men:

It's curious, at the same time, to pose questions to myself and listen to points of view of which I would have otherwise been unaware... You learn that, when the work is both individual and collective, the theme becomes interesting because there are people who bring different perspectives on the theme, and this gives you a kind of opening...

The affirmation of the grand universal principles that provide an exemplary guideline to his life appeared in a part of the interview where he emphasized how he had become intensely and personally involved in the case of the school:

I didn't come out [of this] unscathed either... There was an extraordinary psychological pressure, and I, who wasn't on the inside as I didn't have a child enrolled there, I hadn't even handed over any money, I was tormented psychologically [by this situation], since this process of submission to authority, to

dependence, this has always interested me intellectually. So, I said to myself: “You have a mission to help.” Bearing in mind what was happening, I couldn’t act otherwise, because if I failed to act, one day I would look at myself in the mirror and, knowing I had nothing about it, I’d be disgusted.

This was how Charles, imbued with a sense of mission, offered to help a small group of parents free themselves from the guru. His actions were clearly associated with his wider commitment as a citizen to the ideal of France as a republican nation, composed of free, equal and autonomous men. Charles intervened at two levels: in the debate, encouraging a reflective process among the families in which each member arrived at the truth through the involvement of everyone; and at the politico-administrative level, where he acted as a militant ‘within’ the State authorities, in particular pushing the members of the police force he knew to take up the case: he described his participation in this episode as neutral and discrete. Neutral, since, as he said, he aimed *not to judge*:

I thought it was very important not to arrive saying: “It’s not legal, I know the truth, he betrayed you all,” giving moral lectures. I was above all someone present, listening and helping people to get out of this dilemma individually, to escape the situation, and I think I managed this, especially with two people... I raised some questions, but I was there more to animate the group than anything else.

And discrete because he knew how to use his contacts to gain privileged information and get the State’s surveillance and enforcement services to act. As an example of his intervention, he cited the fact that the State had, at a certain moment, prevented the guru from embarking with some youngsters, despite the fact all of them were already over eighteen years old. The airports and railway stations had been covered with ‘Wanted’ posters depicting the former director, aimed at preventing his departure abroad by taking advantage of the fact that he had an unresolved case in the French courts.

Charles contacted an Attorney General, via a police friend who worked for the French intelligence service (*Renseignements Généraux*), with links to the fight against sects and the League of Human Rights. He took a small chart to show the parents, produced by the anti-sect associations, which explained how to recognize a cult in seven points. This chart, he argued, had been crucial in persuading the parents, since it explained ‘everything’ that the

sects used as recruitment methods. His friend Marie finally persuaded herself of the problem she faced on reading that 'going abroad' was one of the most important signals in terms of identifying the criminality of a sect.

It can be seen, therefore, that, for Charles, seriously developing one's individual autonomy implies a personal willingness to serve in the cause of liberty. The missionary spirit that he advocates finds its roots here in the transmission involved in masonic apprenticeship, where the individual succeeds in becoming autonomous through his socialization into the values of this 'school.' As a freemason, he learnt to take part in intellectual debate and to cultivate a conscience as a liberating instrument, as well as protection against the persuasions and emotional seductions of those who are directionless, "in search of ideals." In this way, a person's conscience takes nourishment from intellectual and moral debate, since respect for the interlocutor, for his ideas and for the debate itself as a source of self-improvement represents both an individual and collective ideal. This, for Charles, is the ideal form of cultivating a society in which *man* exists as a *citizen* and whose values derive from a lay morality programmatically and historically defended by the masons.

His support for the parents was made concrete through the offer of a 'citizen-based' experience of self-development and through the intervention of the State as a public power that protects vulnerable individuals from the harassment of sects. In Charles's terms, cultivating autonomy and conscience means propagating these ideals despite and against both modern bureaucratized institutions and the religious cults. In contrast to his masonic predecessors, he does not see France's secular institutions as the main front of resistance against these evils, nor does he perceive the spirituality cultivated by the communities as a significant obstacle to spiritual freedom. In contrast to Helena's position, for him liberty and autonomy imply, as well as the cultivation of self, the existence of a territory and a political regime which citizens have the mission to defend and safeguard: the republican territory and political regime, based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

In conclusion

The accounts discussed in this article clearly reveal the threat posed by the sects to the integrity of the interviewees and their families. The autonomy of the interviewed parents and their children, however, although appearing as a

common aim, does not amount to a value shared for the same reasons. While Helena sees herself as someone who considers managing her affects and her *spiritual energies* as the basis of her equilibrium and her differential quality as a person, Marie presents herself as a woman whose bond with her children forms the most structuring dimension of her self, resolute in her belief that they must be protected as the heritage of her society. And Charles – who values the filter of his conscience and the moral values that accompany it as the best guarantee of his autonomy – believes that the political sphere has a vital role both in terms of preserving the Republic and in fostering a public spirit to be cultivated individually.

In a way, the doubts and hesitations experienced by the parents during this episode of the sect-school are part of a repertoire of issues relating to the threats and instabilities of the world in which they live. Nonetheless, the uncertainties and rejections that surround social institutions do not make elective affinities the place of the yearned for security. The liberty and autonomy desired by those interviewed can only be ensured with and against these ties.

Paying attention to all the forms of insertion in collective life and acting cautiously imply, firstly, for our freemason, a valorization of reflexive procedures that include learning to take care of oneself better. These procedures can, or should, be accompanied by the watchfulness of the State, the only agent able to penetrate and dissolve the spaces where reason and free will are threatened. As we have seen, for Helena, the harmony between the ideal of the republican society and complete individual fulfilment is not present as an alternative. For her, the threat to personal autonomy pervades all shared spaces and not even the family can guarantee the emergence of this free individual whose construction of self closely depends on his or her inner development. Marie's position differs from the other two owing to the value she gives to the role of the family in educating her children. This ensures their autonomy and also their integration as members of the nation state. The threat suffered by the families therefore stems from exotic and primitive forces originating from countries of the South that must be combated by society and the State.

These convergences between divergent perspectives at various levels are related to the dramas that affect all of us 'modern westerners,' as Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte (2007) shows: the valorization of individual autonomy, which, on one hand, includes and, on the other hand, rejects the attractions of 'communities,' the 're-enchantment' of social relations and the powers of

seduction of the 'East' and its spiritual masters. We adhere to rational and bureaucratic logic, but dream of its dismantling by immersing ourselves in a life project in a distant 'other world,' in the boundless paradises of exoticism, like 'our' Brazilian and... Amazonian versions.

(Translation from portuguese: David Rodgers)

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