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VLADIMIR PIŠTALO

STORIES FROM
AROUND
THE WORLD

Translated from the Serbian by Nada Petković



Gay Science

Joao Rocha
Professor William Falconer
Graduate Student Advisor
Department of History
University of Maine

January 1, 1997

Dear Professor Falconer,

I would like you to consider me for the department funds designated for student travel to conferences. This financial support would make it possible for me to travel to the conference "Borders of Intercultural Interaction in the Post-Cold War World," to be held this year, May 3 - 7 in Atlanta, Georgia.

I have two strong reasons for wanting to attend this conference. The first reason is that, as a student in the humanities, I do not believe in the existence of borders in cultural interactions. The second and main reason is that I have heard that conferences such as the one in Atlanta, provide professors and serious graduate students more opportunities for sex. My intention is to participate in this activity with enthusiasm.

I am convinced, my very dear Professor Falconer, that the duty of a social scientist, a humanist in other words, is to build bridges among people. I believe that the fundamental bridge among people is of an organic nature and given to men at birth. Only that bridge allows us to transform what begins as an informal cultural touch into an intimate organic connection.

With male friends I often drink scotch or caipirinhas, and honest to God I have nothing against them. However, the largest part of my academic and personal activity was, is, and will be devoted to the affirmation of women. I see the conference in Atlanta as a space of total affirmation of women, which for me is adoration. All of modern social history has been called “history from the bottom to the top.” Rarely was a more fortunate expression ever used in the history of science! From the bottom to the top... from a tiny shoe, over the ankle and sweet calf, up to the knee, where the straight hem of a skirt, at least for a while, interrupts our research. Feminists tirelessly repeat that traditional history leaves subjects that are important to women, such as family and sexuality, out of the frame. I admit that the subject of family remains out of my immediate interest, but in regard to sexuality, I throw my hat in the air and exclaim, Hooray!

You, Professor Falconer, probably wonder what qualifies me to participate in this conference. The attached letter of recommendation will assure you that Dona Amado, from the Department of History at Columbia University in New York, exclaimed:

I am delighted to recommend Mr. Rocha as a candidate for leveling intercultural borders and building bridges among races, nations, and genders at this conference. During my more intensive collaboration with Rocha, unlike other students, he not only followed the routine but also always questioned why only certain techniques were applied and not others. When I remarked that his natural endowment was unimpressive, he replied with a Brazilian proverb that states some people have big shoes but do not know how to dance. Soon I became convinced that he was right. In moments of intimacy, Rocha could be faulted for having an overly intensive rapport. However, it is quite certain that his total performance was “very good,” among the top 10% of students. I have no doubt that Joao Rocha will prove extremely successful at leveling borders at this conference.

In her recommendation, Lisa d'Amours, head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine, did not hesitate to admit:

It is a great pleasure to have Mr. Rocha in one's environment and to collaborate intensively with him. He has an affinity for achieving exceptionally good cooperation and for using everyday meetings with colleagues to build intimate and close relationships. The course that Joao took with me covered a wide range of techniques. Joao is an emotional young man, deeply committed to nonverbal communication between genders. He communicates effectively and with great skill. Joao has good potential, although he is sometimes inclined to be overly concerned with emotional peaks and valleys, which can affect his productivity. Although Rocha has a forceful nature, he is not uncomfortable assuming more passive, even submissive roles. He is sensitive to nuances, reasonable and realistic.

His ability for establishing and maintaining a solid bridge between two people is not in doubt.

All in all, an exceptionally suitable, superb candidate...

Dear Professor Falconer, the enemies of knowledge often accuse educational institutions of rigidity. They claim that there are no fresh ideas in academia and that today's innovators are journalists (those epigones of epigones) rather than professors. Let us show them that changes in the academic world, which started in the 1960s, are deeply rooted and have become tradition by now. Let us show that academic freedoms are more important to us than academic restrictions, and that there is no challenge in the industry of knowledge that modern American universities will not boldly accept. If you stick to these principles and grant my request for financial assistance, I will constantly keep in mind, while at the conference, that I represent the historic profession and my alma mater, the University of Maine. I intend to defend the honor of our institution and profession as many times as necessary. I am

ready, or better yet, I feel a burning desire, to build bridges with my female colleagues from the First, Second, and Third Worlds.

Here is my proposed budget of anticipated expenses:

Airline ticket: \$350

Hotel: \$600

Cultural events, lunches, dinners, for myself
and the ladies with whom I intend to explore
the boundaries of inter-cultural collaboration
in the post-Cold War world: \$900

The icon of political correctness,
“Lifestyles” brand: \$100

I believe that \$2,000 does not represent too much of a burden for our department. It is the necessary funding for a social scientist ready to build bridges in the post-Cold War world.

Finally, one more minor thing...

You, dear Professor Falconer, are probably puzzled as to how the essay I intend to present fits the general theme of the conference. Since honesty is my vice, I admit that it does not worry me at all. My essay is entitled, “A Reflection on the Inflationary Economic Cycle in the Popular Culture of Modern Brazil: One Misconception!” The essay analyzes the fact that, here in Brazil, many people think we are poor because we do not have snow. In the words that Eric Hobsbawm applied to Stalin’s work on the nation, the scientific contribution of my essay can be perfectly described as “modest, although not negligible, still derivative...”

I am certain that exchange of scientific information is only one element of the conference. Allow me to insist on other elements. What in other circumstances could be considered lack of restraint becomes impregnated with cultural contents under the auspices of academia. Far from their husbands and wives—whose pictures they have left behind in their offices—professors, who live most of the year as monks, have the right to remind them-

selves that they are also human. The intermingling of different cultures cannot begin in a better way than with the intermingling of ambassadors from these cultures.

As a Brazilian, I cannot see the conference as other than a spiritual carnival in which participants hail from different spiritual schools of samba, the consequences of which are revealed nine months later, typically in the form of a book. For me, this is one intellectual “hodjizio” or “soruba.” Conferences are places where, in the academic environment of our time, Apollonian and Dionysian principles freely interweave, where Clio, the classic muse of history, discovers that her acquaintance with the free-spirited Eros can be fairly inspirational. It has to be so, otherwise—according to the gloomy words of a poet—, “this will be the last autumn, and the winds, full of fallen hair, will blow above the cities.” Only in a situation where Clio is completely alienated from Eros, can humanity be faced with the threat of the true “end of History.”

Respectfully yours,
Joao Rocha

A Chronicle of Hovering

At the very cusp of the twentieth century, terror swept my grandmother off her feet when she realized none of her kinfolk was there to meet her at the New York port. The nine-year-old girl found herself alone in the humongous New World. On Ellis Island, she was discovered by one Đuro Basara, who took her home to the mining town of Export in Pennsylvania. She was still hovering in fear, so Đuro Basara took her hand and pulled her through the air like a balloon. She needed ample time to set down on the new continent. This quiet girl later married one of Đuro's relatives and gave birth to my mother.

While my grandmother remained forever fearful of life, my mother was a stubborn child.

At parties, this stubborn child would suddenly jump up and shout, "Mitar is screwing around with Mileva!" The women in Export hated her, but the girl who eventually became my mother did not think well of her neighbors either.

"All whores!" she would say.

My mother tried to stop immorality in the small mining town. She even spied on her own father and reported everything to her mother. When he found out, the scar on his forehead deepened and turned red. The old miner grabbed a wine barrel, pushed it up the hill near their house, nailed my mother inside, then pushed it down the slope.

While my mother was rolling in a barrel in Export, in nearby Wilmerding, the boy who eventually became my father was selling *Pittsburgh Press* newspapers. In Wilmerding, the river was pol-

luted with sulfur, and the small town was covered with black dust from the steel mills. My father later admitted that he hated selling newspapers.

“The newspaper cost two cents. If somebody happened to give me ten cents and tell me to keep the change, I would immediately count four papers and throw them in the river.”

While the First World War was raging in Europe, there were a lot of orphans among our immigrants in America. My father’s family was aware they were not American. They referred to Anglo-Saxons as “biscuiteers” (*keksars*) because they ate biscuits, which to us were not real food. My father was ten when he lost his father. His mother did not speak English, and she wore traditional folk clothing. Her son, though, was never ashamed of her. He held her hand proudly when he took her for a walk. She passed away when he was only fourteen. When, at eighteen, my father refused to continue school and instead married a sixteen-year-old, he broke his adoptive father, brother Tima’s heart. Out of his small inheritance, he bought a Studebaker and started teaching my mother how to drive. Like in a slapstick comedy, that ended when she plowed the car through the window of the barbershop. Soon after that, the young couple moved to Chicago.

During my childhood, a street was a street and not one’s perception of a street. I carried an umbrella, not because I thought it was raining but because it did rain. Now we think that reality is all in people’s minds. But the neighborhoods we lived in were very real. On one side, we bordered the Irish and on the other, the Italian neighborhood. One could easily get into a fight there. In my neighborhood, though, there were no gangs. Mothers congregated on the street. Old bachelors stopped children to ask if they knew about Pupin and Tesla and pestered them with questions about school.