

SUSTAINING ACTIVISM



*A Brazilian Women's Movement
and a Father-Daughter
Collaboration*

JEFFREY W. RUBIN AND
EMMA SOKOLOFF-RUBIN

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Duke University Press
Durham and London

2013

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ☺

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Arno Pro with Mido display by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear
on the last printed page of this book.*

Title page photograph by Ellen Augarten.

To Shoshana, Hannah, and Esther, with all our love

CONTENTS

Emma's Preface ix

Jeff's Preface xi

Part I: Origins

1. LEAVING HOME *Emma* 3

2. TRANSFORMING SOUTHERN BRAZIL *Jeff* 16

3. FAMILY TIES *Jeff* 28

4. GAMBLING ON CHANGE *Emma* 38

5. FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS IN LATIN AMERICA *Jeff* 50

Part II: The Enchantment of Activism

6. HOLDING PARADOX *Emma* 59

7. SIX MEETINGS *Jeff* 69

Gallery of Photos 87

8. INTIMATE PROTEST *Jeff* 96

9. DEMANDING SPEECH AND ENDURING SILENCE *Emma* 113

Part III: Moving Forward

10. "WHEN YOU SPEAK OF CHANGES" *Emma* 123

11. MOVEMENTS IN DEMOCRACY *Jeff* 136

Acknowledgments 161

Notes 167

Index 179

EMMA'S PREFACE

Gessi Bonês defied her father and started a women's movement when she was seventeen years old. It was 1986, and rural women in southern Brazil didn't have the right to maternity leave, pensions, or autonomy in their own homes. By 2004, Gessi's movement had transformed the lives of women across the region, successfully challenging laws that had once seemed unchangeable, and Gessi had moved from street protests to city hall. That July, my dad and I traveled together to Ibiraiaras, where Gessi and her family lived.

I was fifteen, Dad was forty-nine, and we had set out to research this women's movement as a team. During movement meetings in church basements and interviews in women's homes, we learned what was, and still is, at stake as they try to change the world. As we returned to Ibiraiaras over the next nine years, we learned that doing research abroad changes who you are at home.

When members of the Brazilian women's movement fight for legal rights and a space to speak in rural homes, they challenge deeply entrenched dynamics of gender and power. Dad and I also face conventions—who learns from whom, how fathers and daughters interact—and we try to break them through our collaboration. As the women we met in Brazil let us into their lives, and we kept returning with our writing for them to revise and share, all of us worked to forge relationships of equality across lines of power and tradition.

Ever since Dad and I returned from our first research trip in 2004, friends have asked us what it meant for women who as teenagers defied their fathers to start a movement to see me doing research with my father at just that age. I don't know for sure, but the question has made me wonder about comments that didn't seem significant at the time. What was Gessi's sister, Ivone Bonês, signaling when she said that her father never listened to her? Why did Gessi always introduce us as "Jeffrey and his daughter Emma"? And what could we learn from Dad's graduate student, who said that watching our collaboration made her think of her own father?

Gessi, Ivone, and the other women I met in Brazil showed me the ability of ordinary people to change their communities and what it takes to keep protesting, speaking, and envisioning new ways to reform the world. I learned from their dedication, but not only from their success. Maybe because I was a

teenager when we met, maybe because Dad and I came as a team, they let us into the hard parts of activism: the moments when silence stifles conversation, the difficulty of staying committed to a vision of the world different from that in which you live, and the ongoing question of where and how to fight for change.

JEFF'S PREFACE

When I brought my daughter to southern Brazil to study a women's movement, I knew we were stepping into the middle of a grand arc of social change. Across the vast country, ordinary Brazilians waged a grassroots battle against hunger, poverty, and violence. In the 1980s, they pressed a military dictatorship to accept democracy. In 2002, a nation that had become a laboratory for democracy elected a progressive union leader to the presidency. And in 2010, Brazilians chose Dilma Rousseff, a woman and former leftist guerrilla, as president.

From the beginning of this transformation, the activists in the rural women's movement brought issues of gender equality and women's rights into public spaces. In their *luta* (struggle), they fought for two kinds of rights simultaneously—big economic changes that needed to come from state legislatures and the national government in Brasilia, and daily freedoms that could be won only in local communities and at home.

As we did research together, Emma and I came to understand that this battle went beyond standing up to the police or facing multinational corporations head-on. Hearing rural women's stories, we saw how fighting to change the world and to live your life differently is fraught on the inside with conflict and loneliness, nostalgia and shame. We did not know going in how much it cost individual women—and a women's movement—to put into words the exclusions they suffered and make them into public demands.

We also never imagined how much our relationship as father and daughter would change as we saw firsthand the private pains and triumphs behind Brazil's political transformation. As we grappled to understand the women's enchantment with activism, Emma and I moved from being parent and child, writing in one improvised voice, to working as colleagues, writing in our own alternating voices chapter by chapter.

The women's movement takes shape in big demonstrations, where lines of farmwomen march forward in the face of armed police. It deepens in movement-run pharmacies in the back rooms of houses and union halls, where thick syrups and sweet-scented salves make space for conversation and healing. The political way forward is rarely clear, and re-forming gender roles

is so difficult that after years of struggle, you have to look hard to identify what you've achieved, though you know it's there.

In getting to these places, my unexpected research partner was my daughter. As we work to hammer out new forms of scholarship, and to understand our own world better, we are drawn in by the activism that keeps Brazilian women running for office and mobilizing in the streets for rights. In a world of silencing and violence, their bid to re-enchant democracy is a gamble we want to bet on.



Map of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Map by Bill Nelson.

PART I

Origins

LEAVING HOME

Emma

Gessi Bonês and Vera Fracasso were teenagers when they founded a women's movement that would transform the lives of women in southern Brazil. Two decades later, the movement—and the stories of the women who dared to start something their friends and family believed would fail—had a powerful impact on me. When Gessi and Vera talk about the early days of the movement, their stories sometimes have the sound of distant reflections. But when they try to explain what so enchanted them about activism, and how their lives and the movement they created have changed, they speak with the mix of passion and uncertainty they felt when they were my age.

Vera's father made all the decisions at home during her childhood. Her parents worked side by side in the fields, struggling to make a living on their small family farm. Her father made decisions about what crops to plant, when to harvest them, and what products to sell at markets in nearby towns. Her mother worked on the farm, prepared meals, cleaned the house, and washed laundry by hand. "She participated in the work," Vera told me in one of our earliest conversations, "but never expressed opinions or made decisions." When Vera asked her mother why she hardly spoke at home, her mother responded that life had always been that way.

Vera wasn't content with her mother's silence. "I never accepted that," Vera said, but daily realities resisted her at every turn: like most young women who grew up in the southern Brazilian countryside in the 1980s, Vera had to ask permission to leave the house. The difficulty of daily farmwork, paired with long-standing beliefs about men's and women's roles in the household, meant that there was little space in rural homes for conversation. Good soil and plentiful water allowed many rural families in Vera's state, Rio Grande do Sul, to achieve basic economic security, but solid wooden houses and a modest cash crop did not bring schooling beyond primary grades, access to basic medical care, or an escape from the authority of fathers accustomed to being in control. Even as the physical touchstones of modernity became available to rural Brazilians in the mid-1980s, new agricultural policies made it even more difficult for family farms to compete with large landowners and agricultural corporations.¹ Vera watched her father work to end corruption in the local farmers' union and admired his commitment to making the union a reliable



Gessi Bonès. *Photographer unknown.*

force for defending farmers, but the only workers the union took seriously were men.

Gessi's father also worked in the unions. He had "a vision of participation," she remembers, "and of fighting for rights for farmers." Gessi learned about political organizing from her father and about a different kind of organizing from her mother, who worked on the farm and managed to divide food, farm-work, and household chores among her nine children. Gessi didn't start school until she was nine—it was too much of a burden to get there every day—and when she did start, she walked five kilometers each way, missing two of the next six school years due to sickness. In the winter, she left for school before the sun rose. "We didn't have the road you drove here on," she told me two decades later, "so I walked through forest, on rocks." Growing up, Gessi saw up close the difficulty of everyday life and didn't believe things had to be that way.

Local priests and nuns were the first to take seriously Gessi and Vera's refusal to accept the limitations of their parents' way of life. Bishop Orlando Dotti of Rio Grande do Sul was known for his commitment to liberation theology, a radical current that had been gaining ground within the Catholic Church. Along with other leaders in the liberation theology movement of his time, Bishop Orlando insisted on incorporating the fight for social change into his religious practices and was committed to using his power as representative of the Church to initiate and strengthen this fight.²

In the 1960s, when teenagers in the United States were taking to the streets and beginning to speak about citizenship and sexuality in new ways, Brazil was seized by a military dictatorship that would rule through violent repression for the next twenty years. Citizens who dared to continue protests in the 1970s risked and often lost their lives.³ So the 1980s, the decade when Brazilians overthrew the military dictatorship and could discuss politics and protest against the government without as high a risk of arrest, was in many ways Brazil's version of the 1960s: a moment of possibility and determination that stood in stark contrast to the past. But for Brazilian teenagers in the 1980s, the past was darker than it had been for their American counterparts two decades earlier. Gessi and Vera didn't experience police brutality firsthand until they joined social movements in the mid-1980s, but they still experienced the 1985 transition to democracy against a backdrop of torture and death. Like many Brazilians of their generation, they were both cautious and desperate for change.

For supporters of liberation theology in Brazil's Catholic Church (liberationists), the political shifts of the 1980s led to a period of rapid internal change.

Conditions in rural Brazil improved after the military dictatorship ended, but liberationist nuns and priests, who worked closely with community members and communicated with a wider network of clergy across the country, saw that poverty and violence endured. They developed new ways of thinking about Jesus, the Bible, and the Church itself, and they approached their work with an unprecedented level of commitment to improving the material conditions of poor Brazilians and to helping people live with voice and dignity.

The priests and nuns organized youth groups in which rural teenagers discussed issues of gender and inequality, grappling in new ways with the challenges they faced as a nation and in their daily lives. Father Cláudio Prescendo, a priest in the small town of Sananduva, where Gessi grew up, observed “the harm of concentrated wealth, of large landholdings, of neo-liberalism and free-trade agreements that benefit the richest groups,” and he thought youths would be the most powerful force in countering these harms. Father Cláudio brought busloads of rural teens to nearby shantytowns, just as other clergy had brought him to work in poverty-stricken areas as a teenager. Though many rural families worried about income and food on a daily basis, most of them had shelter and land. This exposure to a different reality, guided by nuns and priests, was instrumental in providing a broader sense of Brazil to teenagers who, according to Father Cláudio, “had never left their worlds.” Many of the people who went on to lead social movements trace their activism to these youth groups, which changed their understanding of the world and of their power as citizens.

Did parents want their children to change? Gessi’s parents were less concerned about what she learned at the meetings than about her going alone. They didn’t mind when she went with her brother, but when he was out on a date or with friends, they always tried to keep her from going to the meetings. Even when Gessi’s older sister Ivone began to participate, their parents resisted letting the two sisters travel alone. The social conventions they were fighting against—the silencing of women, the control of fathers over their daughters’ lives—often kept Gessi and Ivone at home.

That’s not to say the guys had a free ride. Gessi’s husband, Ari Benedetti (known as Didi), also faced resistance from his family. When I asked Didi’s father how his son and daughter-in-law got involved in activism, he threw up his hands and laughed, “When the priests came!” Didi’s father wasn’t always so easygoing. When Didi asked to join the church youth group as a teenager, his father said no. Father Cláudio worked hard to convince Didi’s parents to

let their son participate, returning for three consecutive dinners in a marathon effort to win them over. At other teens' houses, priests or nuns played cards, stayed for dinner, and, if parents still hadn't changed their minds, came back the next week. While the priests lived nearby, many of the nuns traveled from other towns and spent the night with the teenagers' families.

The Church formed a central part of community life in Sananduva, a regional commercial center of fourteen thousand people whose busy main street was surrounded by blocks of brightly colored houses and long stretches of farmland. Priests and nuns carried out baptisms and funerals, and they were the public figures to whom people turned in moments of sickness and economic uncertainty. Aside from wooden farmhouses, which rarely had more than a few rooms, local churches were the only spaces in which community gatherings could take place. Clergy in Sananduva and surrounding towns gained authority from their religious position, but that position did not dictate distance from the community the way it might have elsewhere. For Didi's mother, who attended mass every Sunday, going to church was an excuse to leave her house, and she grew close to the neighbors and religious leaders she met there. Didi's father told his wife that if anything happened to Didi, she would be to blame for trusting the priests. But he didn't stop his son from joining the church youth group. Didi told me this in his parents' house, looking out at the fields where he worked when he was a teenager and walked the unpredictable line between what his father tolerated and what he refused to accept. Didi ran home from the fields each evening, stopped to shower, then sprinted six kilometers to the church for youth group meetings, his dark, curly hair damp with water and sweat. "Sometimes I got a ride back home," he told me, "and sometimes I walked."

Part of the draw of the youth groups for Gessi, Ivone, Vera, and Didi was the possibility of thinking about the world in a different way, of envisioning a future that was different from the world in which they lived. Equally enticing was the chance to take a break from the fields, leave the house, and escape the isolation of life on rural farms. When the government announced plans to construct dams that would flood parts of Sananduva and other towns, priests helped local teenagers form an antidam movement by making T-shirts and posters and organizing demonstrations in the streets. "There are two types of societies," Gessi believed then and believes now: "The more equal society is the one in which people participate, in which people have a right to work, home, food, and education. And the other is the society in which we live . . .