

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FM - 8

Some Dangers of the Status Quo.Recife,
Pernambuco.

10th. September 1966.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York, 17.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The causes of any underdeveloped region's backwardness almost invariably include a weak infrastructure and an over-abundant supply of labour in relation to available capital. Apart from these, there are other signs of underdevelopment which, although not in themselves causes, are likely to be co-existent. Amongst these are a rigid class structure and an abundance of small traders.

But the category that I am concerned with here are neither signs nor causes: they are residual factors that with time threaten to become causes. In the case of Brazil, especially the North East, it is these more than the orthodox causes that ~~could well~~ hinder development in the long run. As the causes of underdevelopment are removed, the signs should disappear automatically, but these residual factors can, on the contrary, assume ever increasing importance and become a kind of malignant tumour. Outstanding among these here are the production of second rate goods, corruption, and a propensity for wasting time that has taken on enormous proportions.

The North East of Brazil, as an area bursting with problems, has already had several books devoted to it, but these have mainly been of a technical nature, and primarily concerned with the economic obstacles to development, and the progress made in combatting them. The potential causes, especially the human ones, tend to be wrapped up in a few clinical paragraphs. However, it is these that thrust themselves forward at every turning, have already contrived to block progress, and show every likelihood of continuing to do so.

The Alliance for Progress has not been a success up to now, and it has become increasingly clear to me, watching the progress of SUDENE and other development organisations in Pernambuco, that the hardest nut to crack is not the shortage of funds, the quantity of foreign investment or even the quality of development plans themselves, but the organisation, mentality, and attitudes - the way people go about things - in this area.

Living mainly in our isolated fishing village, but spending a few days in Recife or elsewhere each month, my own experience is limited. Nevertheless, wherever I have been two characteristics have been so widespread that I do not believe they can be peculiar to the small world with which I am acquainted. These are two of the potential causes mentioned above, namely, corruption and a propensity for wasting time. Depending

upon one's attitude, this time wasting factor is irritating, amusing, or simply curious. What is undoubtedly curious is the lack of reaction, indeed the patience, of Brazilians, to the pace of everyday affairs.

Admittedly the tempo is not altogether within the control of any organisation. Both the hot, humid climate and the poor communications are contributory factors. Even within the city letters take at least three days normally to reach their destination, and sent further afield they take much longer. Telephones have not yet been installed in most cities in the interior, and everywhere demand far exceeds supply, as the number of lines is limited and cannot be increased without a very large capital outlay. A huge organisation like SUDENE has, in its main building, one line. Several departments are now housed fifteen minutes walk away, but the chances of being able to put a call through to them are negligible as the line is always engaged. The only alternative is to walk across, and waste at least half an hour in doing so.

Transport, too, is difficult and frequently accounts for delays. Recife takes pride, quite justifiably, in its internal public transport system of buses, which function efficiently except in rush hours when electricity troubles tend to interfere with the electric ones. Outside the city, the heroic buses struggle over mud and stones, swim through floods and cut across ~~countryside~~ to avoid cavities in the road, so that every trip is an adventure. The bus station in Recife has the air of a poor man's air terminal, with people waiting patiently for news of ~~some bus~~ already several hours late. When it arrives wheezing, with its bodywork covered in mud, and battered, the conditions through which it has struggled speak for themselves.

Last month, when the flooded road to Recife remained impassable to all ~~except~~ diesel engines for nearly three weeks, we were compelled to take the bus. This, a single decker, carried seventy passengers, most of ~~whom~~ spent the three hours leaning over those with seats. For over four miles the bus never once came out of the water: we appeared to be swimming along a river between the cane fields. At times the water covered the high wheels completely, and the bus was filled with diesel fumes. It might have been described as foolhardy to have attempted the trip, but we arrived - just. The return journey started two hours later than scheduled on account of gear trouble. This caused us to break down again half way home. Then we had to stop to fill up with oil, and everybody piled out for snacks. Then the headlights failed. Meanwhile, the interior lights went on and off apparently at will, leaving the passengers in darkness most of the way. We finally swam back through the moonlit cane fields, by then a mere four hours late. Our fellow travellers ~~made~~ the whole trip without showing any signs of surprise or concern, ~~and~~ this sort of journey is not uncommon during six months of the year throughout the North East, and the time so wasted is incalculable.

However, many other delays could be more easily overcome. Although the amount of work achieved in the average working day here is little, the hours worked are long, as the habit of holding two or more jobs simultaneously is very common among all classes, with a split either at midday or in the early evening. Thus, a daytime chauffeur may well work half the night in a newspaper office, and since banks are only open in

the afternoon a post in one of them can easily be combined with running a hotel during the morning. Engenho owners commute between their estates and a profession or business in the city, and even senior academics can only earn enough to keep alive by holding two or three posts. Since Recife boasts no less than three universities, and every year more spring up within a two-or three-hour drive it is not difficult to arrange this, but a great deal of energy and time are wasted in going from one to the other. Others combine academic jobs with school teaching or non-academic posts. One friend lectures from seven to nine o'clock in the morning before going to work all day in an office: this can hardly improve the standard of teaching.

The universities are non-residential, and both students and staff simply attend or deliver their lectures, and then leave: they function like offices. Students too, are almost all part time, and even the richest tend to work half the day as research assistants. The poorer ones work the whole day and only study at night. This is quite feasible since most lectures, which for arts students are virtually the only form of instruction, are held either very early in the morning or at night.

This part time education is extended to the school level, and many of the secondary schools, especially in the smaller towns, only function for part of the day or at night, and the rest of the time the pupils and possibly the teachers, hold other jobs, which leads to a very long and tiring day. In these night schools pupils are of all ages, and by no means all are of the normal school-going age group, but include many who were deprived of a secondary education at the proper time, and had the tenacity to return later on. One perhaps fairly extreme example is of a friend, now aged twenty six, who was brought up in an isolated fishing community as one of the sixteen children of a fisherman. At the age of eighteen, able only to read and write, he moved to Recife, found himself a job in a factory and started studying at night. He now has only one more year before completing his secondary education, and going to the university to read engineering. All this time he has been working in the biscuit factory from seven a.m. until four o'clock in the afternoon, and attending school from seven until half past ten at night, with an hour and a half bus trip home afterwards. Only the weekends are left free for him to study on his own, and although the school is free, he has to keep himself, and buy books and materials with his factory earnings of fifty dollars a month.

In almost every walk of life there is a vicious circle of very low salaries leading to the need for a second post to make enough to live on, which in turn leads to a demand for part time jobs. This has resulted in organisations functioning at different hours, so that it frequently is impossible for direct contact to be made between them. Even if the organisation works all day, the required individual will probably only be there half the day, and this problem of making contact is a very common cause of delay.

In all the offices I have entered, there has been an amazing lack of discipline. Employees quite shamelessly spend most of the day chatting to their friends and ignoring all other business. It can almost be said that only if there is nobody to talk to, do they appear to do any work. This

applies to everybody from the manager down to the lift boy, and for this reason nothing is done to improve the situation. Since those at the top are not concerned with whether the junior employees are even working, they can hardly be concerned with the work they should be doing. Administration is chaotic and coordination non-existent. There is generally an appalling ignorance of what others in the organisation are working upon, and it is not surprising that many jobs are left undone, and others repeated. Trying to work in these conditions must be depressing, and it is understandable that conversation and cafezinhos are preferable.

The time wasting propensity manifests itself equally strongly in the commercial world. There are a great many banks in the city, all of which are crowded during opening hours. It is easy to see why. The administration is such that even to cash a cheque a client probably has to wait nearly half an hour. This can normally only be done in the bank on which the cheque is drawn, as the sum has to be checked against the account since it is illegal to have an overdraft. When the file has been found and the books brought up to date, a chit is finally handed over, and the client passes on to the cashier, where after a further delay, he is handed the money. All the while the numerous bank officials wander around looking as though they had all the time in the world.

Shops appear to exist for the convenience of neither the customer nor the proprietor. In this city of a million inhabitants there is not one large department store, and all the shops are small and specialised. Like a medieval city, the various streets devote themselves almost exclusively to certain items. There are no refrigerated goods, and the only retail outlets for fruit, vegetables and other perishable goods are the two or three large markets, so that frequent trips to them have to be made.

Stocks kept are small, and shops often run out of even the most basic items. On one occasion the three largest chemists had all sold out of sticking plaster simultaneously, and one can chase round the city buying in ten shops what should have been stocked in one. Many goods are only sold in the outskirts or in one particular shop - nailbrushes as far as I know have only one retailer in the whole of Recife - so that enormous distances have to be covered.

Pernambucanos do not seem to have the selling ability of an Levantine merchants and appear to take little interest in whether or not an object is sold. Only in the poorer markets is one greeted by cries of "Diga moça" (literally, "Say, girl", but, in context, this is less abrupt than it sounds). Goods are often presented shop-soiled, especially ready made clothes which are both badly made and expensive since manufacturers have not yet fully succeeded in ousting the private dressmaker.

The buying process is in all shops, even the smallest, painfully slow. When the reluctant assistant has finally admitted that they have in stock the requested object and lifted it, dusty, from the shelf, he has to write out in triplicate a fully itemised bill. Two copies of this have then to be taken to the cash desk where, when the girl behind the grill has finished cleaning her nails, the chits are handed over together with the money. At this point there is another delay as she realises that she

does not have the necessary change. After this problem has been resolved, the change plus one stamped chit are handed back, and one looks around for the control where the goods are collected. When the customer's chit has been painstakingly checked against the control's chit, the objects are carefully made into a parcel wrapped in pink, green or brown paper and tied up with string, for the simple devices of paper bags and sellotape are not yet generally in use here. Any attempts to by-pass the system receives looks of shocked amazement.

Occasionally, innocent pursuits like the purchase of cement lead one to bizarre experiences. Trying to buy two sacks of it in several shops, we were told that it would be very difficult to find any as it was **in short supply**. Finally, after five or six attempts, we learnt that all the available cement was being directed to the new state hospital. Our only hopes of obtaining it were through a man selling it on the black market in the suburbs, and a government depot that might let us have a small quantity. We plumped for the latter, thinking that if there were any, it would be cheaper. There, after working our way through a barrage of underworked guards, we were told that it might be possible the following week, but only if various difficulties were overcome and conditions observed. Not realising that a note slipped across at the critical moment would probably have guaranteed it, the cement did not materialise. This sort of situation occurs frequently with basic supplies, which are either not obtainable or, if they are, only by the most devious channels.

In addition to these not altogether predictable ways of wasting time, there are the twenty six officially listed public holidays which are celebrated throughout Brazil. Included among them are the widely observed religious feasts, her Independence, Liberation of the Slaves, and numerous national heroes. But on top of all these, there are also celebrated the Day of the Tree, Soldiers' Day, The Day of the Radio, and other similar occasions. Major festivals usually manage to spread to at least a day and a half, and Carnival, the biggest of all, has three days. Finally, at least a dozen unofficial holidays are observed, marking the anniversary of the Revolution, or the occasion of somebody's death, or for elections. When, in July, two people were killed by a bomb intended for the leading presidential candidate, a two day national holiday was declared, and in order that children should remember the sad occasion, schools were closed for four days.

Probably a total of nearly forty days a year are observed as holidays, and most of these fall on week days. If they were all on such days, they would account for the loss of eight full working weeks in the year. At times the holiday fetish even becomes ludicrous. The seventh of September, Independence Day, is traditionally celebrated by a parade of the forces and school children through the streets, and for this children practise marching for two or three weeks in school hours. Afterwards, in at least one town, they were given a couple of days' holiday "to rest".

but

This may perhaps sound like Protestant sermonising, /the tortuous, highly personalistic way in which all affairs are conducted here is not only another great time-waster, but is a very serious Brazilian disease

in that it also breeds corruption, and is thus already a considerable obstacle to progress. This personalistic system, moreover, results in a state of mind which is difficult to break down; a cynical acceptance by all classes that money, abraços or influence alone are going to achieve results and that disinterested justice is not only non-existent, but impossible. Since the individual cannot change the system, he must join it. The results, particularly for legal justice, are disastrous, since an unbiased decision is well-nigh impossible, and needless to say, it is the poor who always come off worst.

The poor man without influence must have a patrao, and until corruption - corruption of a gentle Brazilian type, mildly amusing at times but savage at others - is got under control, he continues to need one. An environment of corruption is an excellent one for paternalism, and one in which the rich or influential man can feel immensely self-important. But this dependence of the poor upon the rich, is, to one unaccustomed to it, almost nauseating. The way that the former dare not be critical, except behind closed doors, fawn, and whilst they expect help, are both surprised and grateful for anything unasked, makes them, as citizens, a pathetic race. The rich, in their idolized position, scarcely merit it. They are, with disappointingly few exceptions, narrow minded, ill-educated, materialistic and crude. I have yet to meet one genuinely concerned with his country's problems, or that could in any sense be called a philanthropist.

It seems to me that the common explanation put forward for paternalism as the aftermath of a master-slave plantation system, is not entirely satisfactory. Paternalism continues to flourish because the poor are helpless without money and influence in the face of corrupt policemen and other public officials.

The police are paid reasonable salaries, but there is probably not one member who does not live to a large extent off tips and bribes. Some have more skill than others in extracting these, and a man who does it without others being aware is generally admired. Some however, do it by cruder means, playing on the innocence and passivity of the people. As one parochial example, the other night, a constable from the local town arrived during a public dance being held in the village, Giving no reason, he demanded all the money collected from entrances from the man running it. Without a murmur, the latter handed it over, and his reaction next day was not to go to the constable's chief, although he complained that the police had no right to the money, but to refuse to hold any more dances. His reason for this was, that if he complained to the man's superior, the constable would dog him, and seize him later on for some trifling offence, but at least, if he held no more dances they could not steal his money in the same manner again.

This is the prevailing opinion of which instances occur time after time. If a junior official takes advantage of a man's ignorance or timidity, the latter is most unlikely to complain both for fear of later reprisal and as he has little faith in finding sympathy from the higher authorities, even if he knew to whom he had to apply. One woman in the village, discussing the matter, said that she was most surprised to learn from the teacher that the police were not allowed to receive bribes. She was not alone in thinking that the police have a right to bribes, rather as a waiter has a right to tips.

Instead of making a direct complaint the recognised alternative is to appeal to their patrão or a rich acquaintance taking the role of patrão

for help. He will fight the case of the wronged subject, and will consider it a duty to do so. When a man was caught stealing money from the store in a nearby village and was imprisoned in the local town, his godfather, one of the most influential men there, asked the police to release him, for no reason other than he was his godson. This was immediately done, and the incident ended.

The position of the rich is different. In the first place they will take care to have one or two friends among the police, and secondly, should they be in trouble, money and friends can almost certainly resolve things immediately.

Similar tools are needed to obtain anything in the bureaucratic network. There is no country fonder of making laws than Brazil, but the local government hierarchy also has a weakness using, manipulating or neglecting these laws depending which suits their needs at the time. They are almost certain to go undiscovered since no member of the public could possibly keep himself up to date on them.

To go about a simple bureaucratic process such as the obtaining of a driving licence, there are no recognised procedures or order of events. Every case is examined and treated separately. Anybody with friends or a well known name is guaranteed rapid treatment: the rest have to pay for the services they are receiving. If this is not made voluntarily in the form of a bribe, it is extracted in the form of an additional charge that is not mentioned on the receipt. If no money is forthcoming, the case is put off for so long that the unfortunate client becomes desperate and finally pays.

The road to power in local politics is equally corrupt. The opinion of the voters appears to be unimportant except in a very few cases. With money to win the votes of the man in the street, and a well known face to attract the rest, policies count for relatively little. The vote is open to all those over eighteen who pass a literacy test of writing out a simple petition without a mistake. Politicians, anxious to increase the number of electors to obtain the maximum number of votes, make every effort to help, providing transport, and aiding the less literate with their spelling. At least one girl elector could only write her name: the rest of the petition had to be dictated to her letter for letter.

The populace are generally as anxious to be on the electoral role as the politicians are to obtain votes, since they are thus also eligible for presents.

Every village is canvassed by at least one candidate in any local election who has to be prepared to give the community a handsome present, or to give the individual voters relatively large sums of money or other gifts. The bribes in money frequently value at least four or five dollars. The value of the presents to the voters is very much greater; they include wood or tiles for the house, or clothes for the family. Bribes have come to be regarded as a right by the electorate, and election time is eagerly awaited by all. As one of the most intelligent fishermen remarked, with much unquestionable truth: "Politicians do nothing for us after they have been elected, so why shouldn't they do something beforehand in return for our votes?" He explained that when the candidate or his agent came to ask for his vote, he was circumspect enough to ask what they would give him if he were to do so. If the offer were not up to expectations, he would refuse. Thus

a bargain for the vote is struck, satisfying both parties.

People are politically disillusioned: the stated policies of candidates are listened to with a cynical ear, even by those who are usually most credulous. What they do not see, is how by this system of bribery, they are merely acting against their own interests in the long run, since the richest man will almost inevitably win, and will never put the interests of the poor before his own. It is virtually impossible for a middle or working class representative to be elected unless the existing system has its back broken by an effective reduction in the techniques of bribery.

The people here have an attitude to the present situation that is not one of resignation as much as blind acceptance, and a vision that does not enable them to see that the shortcomings are not inevitable. They cannot conceive a police force that is uncorrupt or a foncionario that is unbiassed. That punctuality could actually be expected, that business should be done satisfactorily without a chain of acquaintances in every walk of life, and without fawning to the rich, are concepts which, to them, are scarcely credible. That politicians should ever be drawn from men of their own class who are not interested in preserving the status quo, has simply not occurred to them as a realistic possibility.

This all enveloping system will be difficult to destroy, and in this post-revolutionary era the voices for widespread reform are silent. But until, on the one hand, steps are taken by the authorities to control the system of appointments and efficiently check bribery, and on the other, some popular leaders arise to persuade the people to fight for their own rights, the situation can only grow worse. Enough of the humorous bantering which the subject tends to evoke in the international press: it is more serious than this.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell

Fanny Mitchell.

Received in New York September 19, 1966