

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Brazil: Recife, False Gem of the Northeast

Recife, Pernambuco
Brazil

4 November 1967

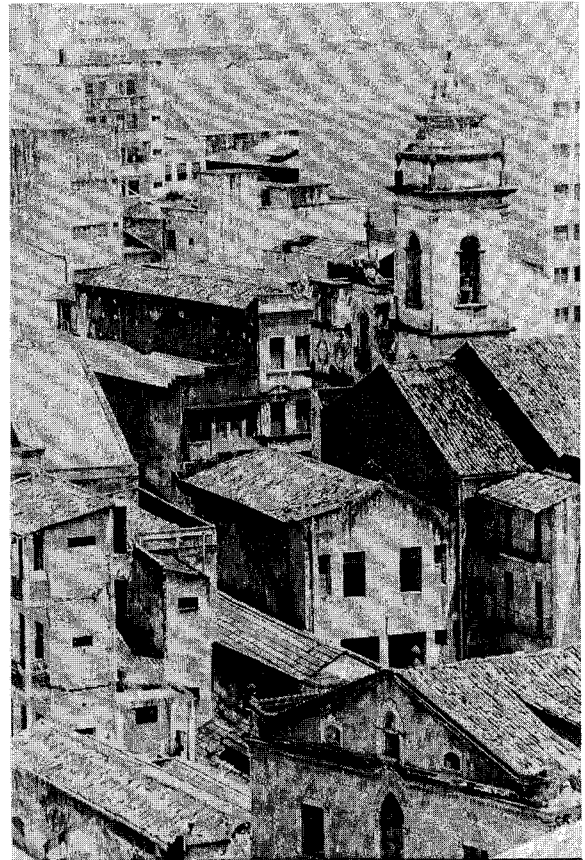
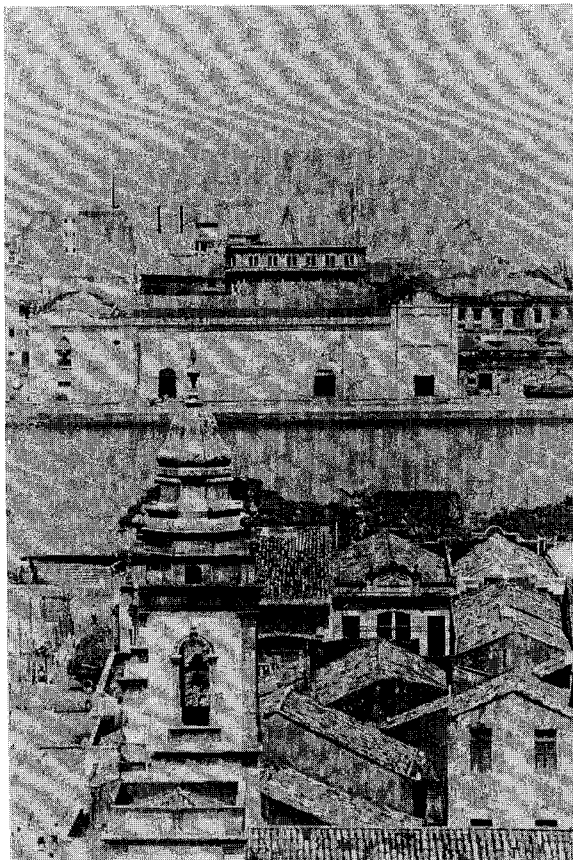
Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It was Saturday night, about 9:30. Only a wide street and a row of palms separated my hotel from the Rio Capibaribe—beyond lay the island of Recife. A grove of derricks and ship masts on the far side sprouted above weatherbeaten warehouses and a colonial church, the whole fused by a patina of dun, chalk, sepia and shadow. The lamps on the quay cast a silver glaze across the water, shattered into brilliants by the breeze.

On the street below buses braked and idled at the stop. Disembarked, animated Saturday-nighters scurried among the traffic, angling off

BELOW. Scenes over Recife. On the left, from the main island, Santo Antonio, across the Rio Capibaribe to the island of Recife, and the ocean beyond. On the right, the island of Santo Antonio with ocean and break-water in the distance.



toward the center of the city. In contrast, one middle-age woman stepped from the curb, retreated, lingered near the stop. A beige Volkswagen slowed alongside of her. She approached. It sped away.

About 20 minutes later, I watched another woman just off the bus---this one in a tailored white blouse, neatly tucked into a mini-skirt---belted, narrow and delft blue---showing the slim legs of a pretty young girl, 17 or 18. She hesitated, crossed to the strip of park in the middle of the street and sat on a bench. The same Volkswagen came along and, this time, stopped. It seemed she would remain seated, but slowly she rose and went to the driver's window. As they talked, she lifted and twisted her right leg, a nervous release. She went back to the bench and picked up her purse. They drove away.

Poverty in Recife is a pathogenic sire of marginal occupations. The sidewalks are a welter of beggars, potholes, hucksters, orange peels, pedlars, paper scraps, and spittle---the debris of humanity. Those who are lucky enough to be deformed merely beg---a straight forward appeal to one's compassion. Those who are whole and only starving must conjure up some ruse, or at least some petty commerce.

In the first category, the beggars, are the professionals. They have a set place and they tend it everyday; they have their cronies who pass the hours with them and their regular donors who, knowing they will pass that set place, have their alms in hand, as one would have the toll ready for the Lincoln Tunnel. The best places are where the sidewalks are narrow and there are no shop windows which give excuse to look the other way; therefore, bridges. This "Venice of South America", broken into pieces by the Capibaribe and Beberibe Rivers and by tines of the ocean, is a beggar's paradise. The floods of the last two years have also increased their sphere of influence by undermining the Boa Vista and Maurício de Nassau bridges, closing them to vehicular traffic; thus, the beggars and their ancillaries can spread out over their domain through which the captive pedestrian flow must tread with care to negotiate its maze.

The doyen of the beggar corps was only temporarily dislodged from the Boa Vista when repairs were in full spate. He has been in the same place over the three years I have been coming into Recife; surely he was there years before and, if the force of life persists, he will surely be there for many more. That force of life is one of the few things about him which suggest that he is human. His voice has the timbre of a primitive stringed instrument, void of modulation and resonance, but he giggles and gossips with his buddies as though he were just like them.

The first time I crossed the bridge, scanning for all views, my eyes were stopped by him. Inwardly I gasped, and quickly looked away. Across the bridge the U.S. friend at my side said, "Did you see that?" No need to say what, but already disbelief had set in for both of us. Perhaps it was some hallucinatory flash---but we both had seen it.

The next time I looked; since then I have become immune, neither searching out nor striving to avoid. His chair holds a being suggesting a

man; a head, almost as wide as his shoulders, is pocked with traces hinting of features. Clothed only in trousers, his body is the size of a small child's but formed as a man's; the limbs are dwarfed and twisted. The whole is parched to the brown brilliance of an insect's shards---tempered by years on the sun-baked bridge. In the United States, he would not be born; if born, he would be in an institution---never to offend our eyes, never on the street laughing with normal creatures.

He is the product of a parentage run amok. Others acquire their beggar's credentials later in life---those whose feet are turgid and purulent with open sores and boils, women with legs knotted and swollen by the massive edema of pemphigus, and others simply with limbs maimed or amputated. Poverty cannot contemplate wheelchairs; therefore, invalids' dollies are a specialty of Recife: a slab of board mobilized by roller skate wheels. They maneuver their trunks at ground level over sidewalks and streets of rutted mosaic, cobblestone and concrete. Others take the direct route, dragging themselves along on the seat of their pants. Never have I come to respect the wonder of locomotion by two healthy legs as I have in Recife.

These I have spoken of are the veterans of the trade, endowed with the necessary trappings to prove their qualifications. Then there are the apprentices, who may never survive to become journeymen. Their most profitable bailiwick is the post office.

There is invariably a line. You are bearing, let us say, two letters, aérea e simples, air mail and not registered. They are weighed and you are given a clutch of stamps---all colors, all sizes---which you yourself must smear with glue (along with your fingers) and affix to the envelopes. Inevitably the charge is some offbeat figure---Cr.\$670 or Cr.\$835. You don't have the exact amount so you give a note of Cr.\$1000. The change of ragged, scotch-taped bills comes to six or ten cents. You can wad it up in your billfold, or---there is that little boy at your side, almost pressed against you, his abdomen distended, his arms like sticks and his eyes intense upon you.

When I first came to South America, I was quite puritan in my attitude toward begging. Begging was, at the least, embarrassing, at the most, sinful: people should work for a living. At a restaurant in Bogotá I gave down for the first time to a small boy who had dared to penetrate its inner sanctum---making a desperate sashay before the waiters ran him out. My spontaneous donation was a piece of bread; it was in his mouth almost before it left my fingers. And I understood, suddenly, the reality of hunger. A similar invasion by a boy in Cochabamba, Bolivia, was a dry-run, but as he scurried for a back exit, his fingers dipped into a mustard pot and carried a small nutrient to his mouth. Hunger is omnipresent and employment is scarce.

As responsible Americans, we try not to disrupt the local wage scale by our affluence and generosity. What is the wage scale of a beggar? Since a dollar is worth Cr.\$2700 and the minimum monthly salary in Recife is Cr.\$82000, what do you give to a little boy with big eyes tapping you on the elbow? I have no norm. This is something you forget to ask when you meet with your middle-class Brazilian friends---"how much do you give to a beggar?"



So, it is by whim---the size of the change, and of the little boy's appeal.

But whether apprentice, journeyman or master craftsman, all these belong to the same "elite guild". Then there is the commonality of marginal occupations: the pedlars and hawkers. They gain attention not by the quality of their wares but by the quantity of their agitation. The ears are bombarded by a cacophony of noises; a shrill voice lauding the cheap price of his

ballpoint pens, another demonstrating a dissonant plastic accordian, a third blowing useless bird-shaped whistles, little chicks peeping, a lottery vendor calling out his numbers, and another the virtues of his fruits. These carry the melody set against a throbbing rhythm of honking cars, police whistles, and record shops blaring the latest ye-ye-ye.

The ears suffer all simultaneously. Likewise, the eyes are challenged by a multitude of dimensions---descry the uncovered manhole, the unexpected ledge, the legless beggar, the shoeshine boy's stool, the tray of trinkets, the crossing amid ensnarled traffic, the crate of apples balanced on the head of a porter. See all things at all heights, also simultaneously.

The two cliques, the beggars and the pedlars, impose their presence by physically blocking the walkways. Then, there are the marginals who subsist on odd-jobs which deploy them in the gutters and the streets; the young lads who gather trash into baskets, the urchins who guard parked cars from thievery, the collectors of paper scraps, the go-getters who cajole drivers into a car wash---and the human draft horses, shirtless, in front of two-wheeled carts, hands grasping the shafts, head down, back haunched, pulling loads of sacked potatoes or sugar, beer or furniture.

Because they are too old, too weak, too tired or the wrong sex, others must fend for themselves upon the leavings of nature and man. In this tidal estuary, the mudflats of the rivers are exposed each day. This Venice, as its namesake, then turns more fetid than romantic. The vultures pick at the scum abandoned by the waters, and people join them, ankle-deep, to scoop out a repast of water crabs. Meanwhile, their confreres, bird and man, carry out a similar search for delicacies in the garbage dump along the shore.

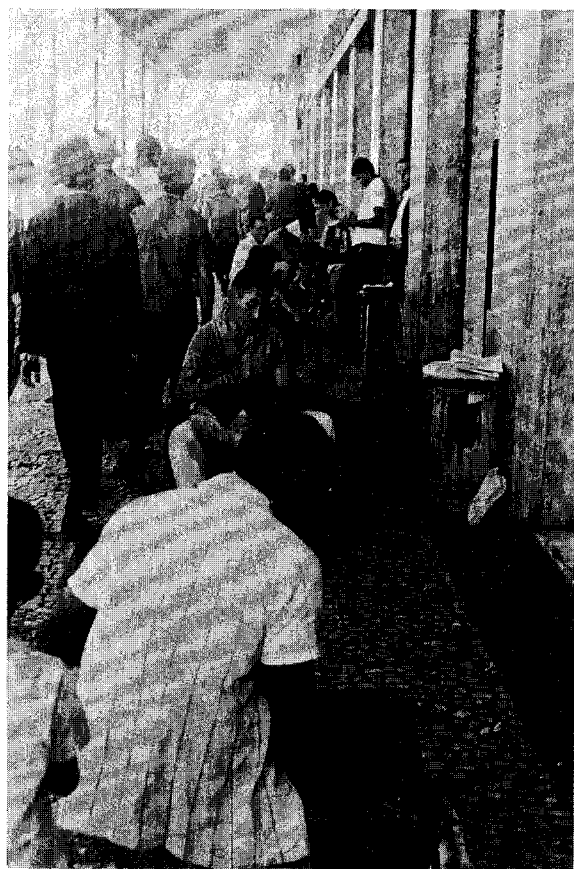
The overall effect of Recife is Kafkaesque: the broken streets, the precarious traffic, the confusion, the competing noises, the human ugliness, the destitution. The disease that underlies its ailments is macrocephalia---a city growing too fast too soon. In 1940, its population was 347,000; by 1950 there was a 51% increase to 524,000; by 1960 another 52% to 797,000. When in 1966 Recife reached one million, a local newspaper, Diário de Pernambuco, lamented it as a pyrrhic achievement in the light of the slum conditions (mocambos) of the residents:

"Recife continues big and poor in the feigned role of false gem of coastal civilization...In 1939 a survey by the Federal Interventor...found 43,581 mocambos in which lived 164,837 people...in 1961 the city government (in a survey) found 109,678 mocambos of which 84,409 were of adobe and 25,269 of other materials such as thatch, empty sacks, cement, pieces of boards, and tin cans. Now (1966) it is estimated there are 120,000 mocambos...housing 600,000 people, more than half of the city's population."

One geologist wrote of Recife: "What isn't water was water or suggests water; for this reason we may call it an amphibious city." No one could better attest to this than the slum dwellers whose mocambo huts squat on the saturated swamps alongside the two rivers; in Portuguese the generic word used to describe these have-not areas is alagado.



The Street
Merchants
Of Recife



With a social worker I visited Coque, a showpiece of all that is negative in an alagado. One dirt causeway twisted through it, between the river on one side and the railroad tracks on the other. Just off this artificial rise the ground oozed water when stepped upon,---or, beyond retention, supported stagnate puddles---or soured under the dumpings of the city garbage. The mocambos were mostly one-room boxes of wooden slabs with no windows, no foundation and no flooring, sitting on the mud. The children---their nakedness exhibiting the ugliness that comes of malnutrition and parasitic infections---played amid the hogs and chickens, the flies and garbage. Many women sat vacantly in the doorways, not even talking among themselves. Only one man could be seen---drunk. The older children took us for diversion, flocking around and making wisecracks; my Portuguese was not at the level---low enough---to understand them.

The mocambo is a fester which reinfects itself. A woman has a baby every year; 60% of them die before they are one year old. But the survivors represent a proliferation: half of the Northeast's population is under 15.

The population explosion coupled with the migration from the rural areas creates the staggering sociological phenomenon of urbanization. During the decade 1950-1960, Latin America's urban population growth rate was 55%, while the rural rate was only 12%. Recife is growing at 5% per year. Brazil's largest metropolis, São Paulo in the south, is burgeoning even faster, at 5.6%, as it draws off a sizeable contingent of the Northeast overflow. From 1950 to 1960, Pernambuco increased in population 21.9% while the state of São Paulo grew 42%.

I asked the pretty young maid in my hotel room if she was born in Recife..."yes". Are you happy here?... "no". What do you want to do?... "go south". Do you have family there?... "yes, all my brothers have gone". Why did they leave?... "to live better". It was a terse explanation of the population flow from north to south.

The critical difference between the two cities, Recife and São Paulo, is the last answer---"to live better". The dream is not always fulfilled, but the odds are more favorable where swelling industrial and service sectors keep pace with the manpower supply. Until a decade ago the only significant economic activity in the "Capital of the Northeast" was a tradition-bound sugar industry with a cluster of commercial appendages.

Since the creation of the regional development agency (SUDENE) in 1959, industrialization has been a major hope. It is estimated that some 400,000 new jobs have been created, one-fourth of them within factories, the other three-fourths in supporting activities. But the pace is not adequate to cope with a 5% urban growth; the labor force grows 4.9% per year, job opportunities by 3%. A recent survey by the Institute Joaquim Nabuco of Social Research found 40% of Recife's potential labor force unemployed.

The panacea of industrialization has turned a bit sour, indirectly for the planners, directly for the man-on-the-street. Job openings do not proliferate with modern industry; machines perform routine tasks and

employment goes to skilled workmen. For instance, the residents of Cabo, a rural community being encompassed by a tentacular Recife, were animated by the promise of a major industry implanted in their midst. During its construction, the inhabitants of the town became fully-employed laborers, capable of the manual tasks at hand. But when the time came to hire employees within the factory, management imported them from other centers where educational opportunities had qualified the men for more technical work. Cabo slipped back to its marginal existence, further disillusioned with the rewards of economic development.

Although the growth rate of the Northeast has been raised to 7%, it is generally conceded that it is the rich and part of the middle class who are benefitting. In a speech in January 1967, Pernambuco's Governor Nilo Coelho said:

"Pernambuco is growing economically, but the majority of the people of the state are not being incorporated in this wealth. The number of marginals, instead of diminishing, is increasing."

Recife, one of the world's poorest cities, is but the sore that manifests a widespread cancer, the urban tumor largely the consequence of rural conditions. No place in the Western Hemisphere are these more anguished than in the Northeast, one-fifth of Brazil's territory. SUDENE has compared its destitution to Southeast Asia and Africa.

Education and health conditions are obviously abysmal. Briefly, to give a dimension to the problem: illiteracy is over 70%, caloric intake ranges between 1200 and 1900, schistosomiasis affects 90%, intestinal parasites over 90%, falariae..., Chagas disease..., beriberi..., edema..., tropical fungi..., smallpox....

Below I extract from two editorials in the Fortaleza newspaper, Unitário, which appeared during my one-month stay there:

9 August 1967: "(Regarding schistosomiasis) the highest incidence of infection is in Recife, city at the margin of major rivers and built upon swamps..."

"At times the parasite attacks the heart or even the brain of its carriers. The worse is that there is no cure..."

"The most efficient method to wipe out the parasite would be by educating our people in sanitary habits...If all the houses had drains and no one had to resort to the open field to relieve himself..."

"With its vast experience with the problem, the National Department of Rural Epidemics knows how to cope with (schistosomiasis). But perhaps it does not have the financial means to expand its program...a situation to be lamented."

2 September 1967: "...the facts demonstrate that Ceará still has foci of smallpox, one of the most terrible plagues not only because it often kills its victims but also because the skin of those who survive



ABOVE. Digging crabs from the river bed at ebttide.

mined by the Borborema, an escarpment inland from the coast, which bars the progress of rains coming off the Atlantic. The sertão, located behind this natural barrier, has a precipitation of less than 500 mm. in some places and supports only a xerophitic vegetation called caatinga. Scrub growth straggles amid the hamada, and there are but two crops of any significance: a perennial tree cotton, called moco; and a spineless cactus, palma, used for forage. Cattle-raising is the one major commercial venture, and the symbol of the sertão is the vaqueiro, the lean cowboy enveloped in leather from his narrow-brimmed, round crowned hat down to his slim britches winged by chaps.

The Brazilian journalist, Antonio Callado, describes the sertão as follows:

"...even with a good winter (rainy season) the situation is bad. When there is no winter...when the awaited rains do not come, the world is frightening...even the granite, facing its situation in that terrible desert, adopts empirical solutions. It comes loose from its bed, it begins to disintegrate, unable to support any longer, after myriads of years, the oscillations of temperatures between the intense heat of the sun and (the cold) of the night. There (in the sertão) the hides of the thin cattle are the best in Brazil. There is not one tick on the cattle. In that climate not even a tick can

is so wretchedly scarred.

"Even though it is easy to acquire immunity by means of vaccination, it is difficult to convince the indifferent and the ignorant, unaware of the dangers if they do not protect themselves. It is lamentable that the majority of our people are as yet lacking in knowledge. However, this is no surprise considering that at least half of the population of Ceará—or perhaps more—do not know how to read or write."

Parenthetic to this synthesis of the health conditions, I might comment that when the owner of a sugar plantation (usineiro) commented that his peasants were very lazy and never did a good day's work, I quite understood how this might be.

The Northeast is divided into three geographic areas: the sertao, the dry interior occupying some 90% of the whole; the agreste, a transitional belt with intermediate rainfall; and the zona da mata, the humid litoral. The divisions are deter-

survive. But men live there, men who oblige the cattle to live also."

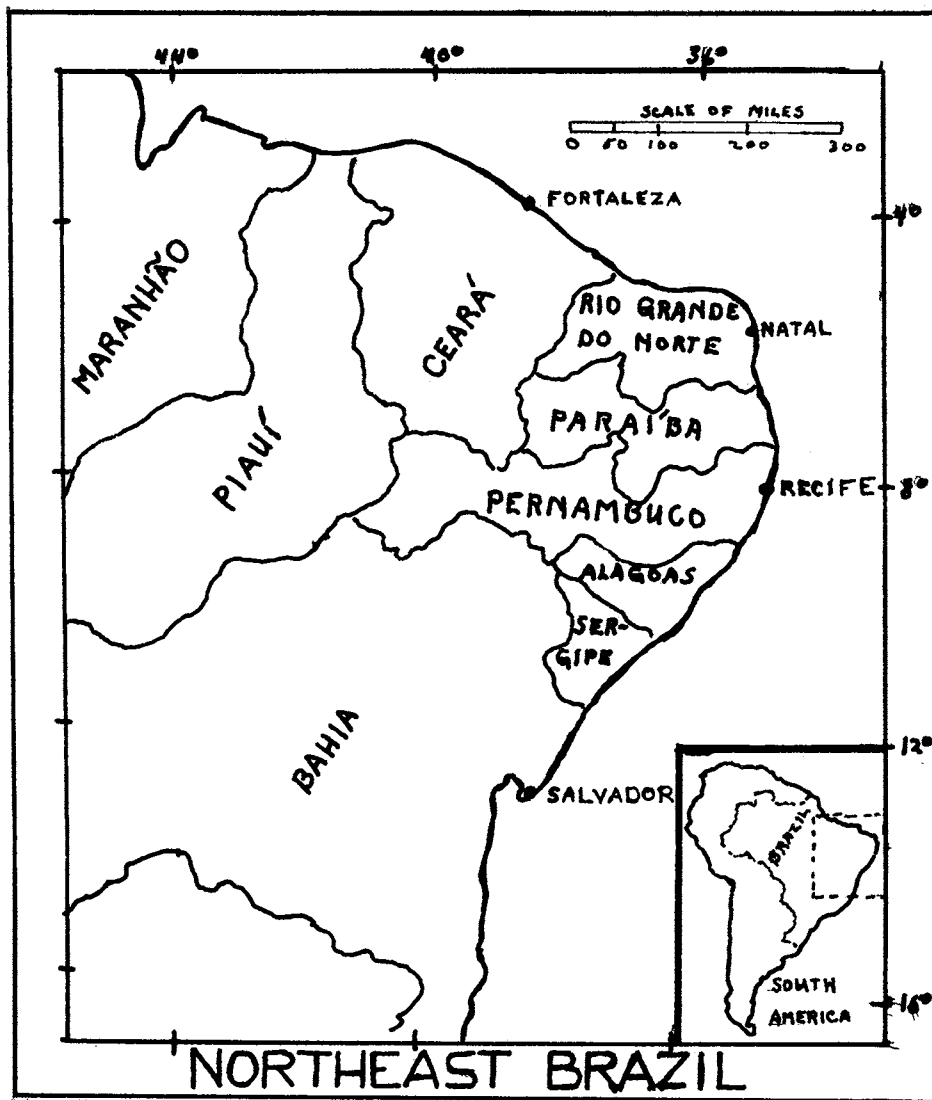
Always in the back of the mind of every inhabitant of the sertão (sertanejo) is the threat of the drought. A rich body of folklore and witchcraft has built up around it. The pattern of history suggests that every tenth year is critical, and there is special dread of years with the digit "7". When, indeed, the winter brings no rain, and the drought comes, then man, like the granite, finds his empirical solution: he migrates toward water, perhaps eastward only to the agreste, perhaps all the way to the coast. Cities along the litoral, particularly Fortaleza and Recife, invariably suffer an influx of desperate sertanejos when a drought sears the interior.

Likewise the agreste is affected, its precarious rainfall also diminished and its slender resources already stretched to sustain a denser population. In contrast to the sertão and the zona da mata, the tenure problem here is minifundia, and the main activity is subsistence agriculture. More and more, the small farmers who either rent or own inadequate plots of a few acres find that the poor soils have reached exhaustion after generations of cultivation with no rejuvenation. Fertilizers are priced beyond the wildest dream of a peasant who rarely has access to any source of credit, and his animals are too few to provide sufficient manure. But the small improvement in health conditions brought by federal and international agencies have saved the lives of more of his children. The mandioca must be spread thinner until finally someone must migrate in order to survive.

The third fate of the peasant of the Northeast is the zona da mata. Sugar is the monoculture which dominates this coastal strip from Paraíba to Bahia. Based upon a plantation system initiated four hundred years ago by the Portuguese, its traditions have changed little and its operations only slightly more. But external factors have changed. Long ago the Northeast lost its monopoly of the world market, and today it must compete with other areas, including southern Brazil, which cultivate a high yield cane and process it with modern machinery. The Northeast's profit margin is drawn to a thin line, and it is exacted largely from the exploitation of cheap labor.

During the Goulart-Arraes governments before 1964, the minimum wage law was enforced, plunging the sugarmen into panic. More and more they turned to government institutions for credit, but inflation skyrocketed interest rates. The peasant too was the victim of the inflationary vise. A survey 50 kilometers from Recife found that a workman received Cr.\$80 for a day's labor at a time when the price of a liter of mandioca flour had gone up to Cr.\$170. In the spring of 1962 alone, the price of mandioca increased 400%.

Since 1964 both world sugar prices and the Northeast's competitive capabilities have weakened. In difficult financial straits some usinas have resorted to paying their peasants with vales, pieces of paper honored only in the usina's own "company store"---an institution infamous for its price gouging. The sugar men are faced by the alternatives of 1) massive investments in refinery and field equipment, fertilizers, insecticides



and fungicides, or 2) find recourse in other activities.

A two-day stay at an usina (sugar plantation) in southern Pernambuco gave me a chance to observe the heartland of the region's sugar country. The driver of the jeep which took me the 105 kilometers between Recife and Palmares was born and raised on the usina which I visited, and he knew the tale of every usina along the way. Three major trends became obvious by the information he gave me.

"Fechada" was the word he used most often: it seemed that half the usinas along the way were closed—"fogo morto" as the local saying has it, meaning that the boilers of the refineries are no longer fired. In 1950 there were 76 usinas in the state of Pernambuco, now there are 42 and four of these are under government intervention because of failure to

fulfill their financial obligations. On some of the fechadas the land was parceled out on a rental or lease basis to the peasants who continue growing cane to provide the extant usinas. But cultivation is reduced to the most primitive methods and yields to a minimum.

Another solution was also visible along the highway: sugar cane gone to scrub or turned into pasture for the current rage of the zona da mata---cattle. SUDENE is encouraging and assisting the changeover; in August 1967 the Minister of Agriculture announced that the government's program to develop the cattle industry would be intensified. An agronomist with whom I talked on the Usina 13 de Maio, under government intervention, estimated that of the 2500 workmen on that plantation, only 50 would be retained if it were converted to cattle.

The third trend is symbolized by the Usina Pumaty which I visited: an increasing capital investment in plant machinery and field equipment in order to surmount the crisis. Although the hilly terrain of the zona da mata will never allow complete mechanization, still the process of modernization inevitably spells reduced manpower.

These three trends---shut-downs, cattle-raising and mechanization---represent adjustments to the exigencies of the times but they also result in a denial of a means of livelihood for the peasant. Rural unemployment is burgeoning, estimated at about 250,000 in Pernambuco alone. Palmares, "the capital of the sugar country", is overrun with forced loafers, men with nothing to do. At daybreak the trucks from the functioning usinas come into the towns and pick up loads of men eager for a day's work. During the harvest, Pumaty has over a thousand temporaries per day in addition to its own two thousand men who live on the plantation. The traditional system of the morador, resident on the usina, is breaking down, and in its stead is a growing nomadism, men whose complete ownings are tied within a bundle as they walk from town to town in search of work. Competing among themselves for a parcel of subsistence, they are, even more than before, victims of the usina's monopsony of the labor market.

The increasing rural impoverishment forces men from the land. The city becomes the catch-all.

In addition, there is a progressive impoverishment of the region as a whole, affecting both city and country. The Northeast contains over 25% of the population, but earns only 10% of the national income; South Brazil, increasingly industrialized, holds 35% of the population and earns 50% of the national income. Whereas the 1960 rural per capita income in Pernambuco was Cr.\$10522, in São Paulo it was Cr.\$30024. It all starts with the natural resource base: poor soils and difficult climate. Because of these conditions, agriculture took an extensive form---a plantation or ranch system leading to feudal social relationships. Sequentially, little thought, attention or investment was given to the human resource base.

When the industrial revolution hit Brazil, reaching full stride after World War II, the Northeast, wed to traditional agriculture, was left in

the backwater by the economic boom in the South. Modern agriculture has an output ratio of 10 to 25 years for its capital allocations, whereas industry realizes its investment in 1 to 10 years. Furthermore, profits gained in the Northeast have been lured southward to more glamorous and lucrative enterprises.

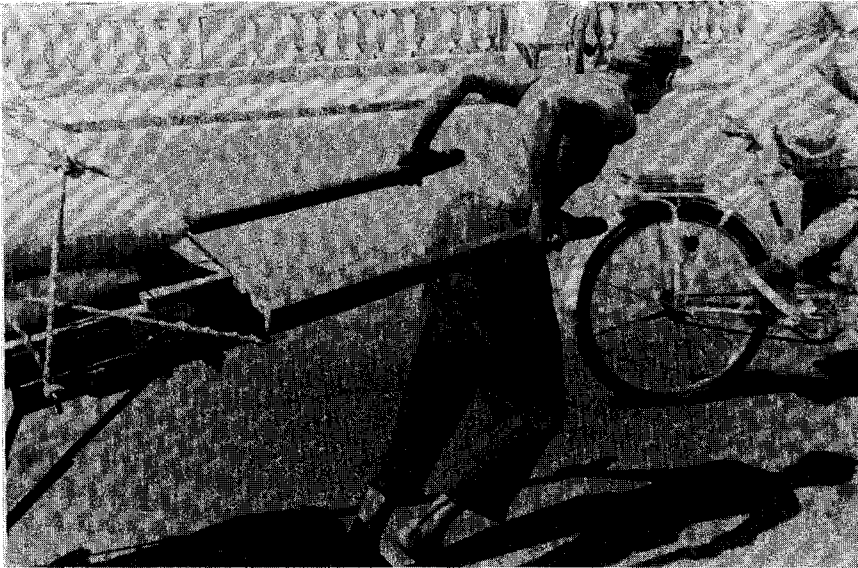
Although inherent in the region's social and economic structure, all these conditions have climaxed in the last two decades: soil exhaustion, over-population, labor exploitation and cut-backs, capital flight, inflation, social conflicts overt poverty.... And they have been agitated by the increase in communications and associations which have shattered the serenity of the former isolation. The poor man now knows he is worse off than other men, and he is stimulated to seek some solution for his plight.

Gino Germani, noted Argentinian sociologist, has observed that migration is a substitute for social revolution. Perhaps it is merely a palliative. For the peasant to move to the city does indeed connote an upward social mobility. The city in itself brings certain social satisfactions which assuage the wants and ambitions of the pauper. He also gains a degree of independence he did not have in the tight paternalistic structure of the rural area. But in most cases he continues poor---he merely transfers his destitution from the field to the favela.

And the city as an institution becomes impoverished. Its services boggle before the onslaught. Recife has all the ailments of a provincial capital abruptly transformed into a metropolis. Its streets peter out into dusty lanes before reaching the city limits. Sanitation systems service the area of years ago, leaving residents on swamps and hilltops to their own means. Inadequate telephone cables create exasperating delays, and lines to some areas, such as Cabo, seem constantly out of order.

The historic rivers, Capibaribe and Beberibe, have become sluiceways for sewage and garbage and, at times, not sluiceways but filthy floodtides overrunning the city. Because of the myriad demands upon the governments' budgets, the dredging of the rivers and canals which drain the city has been progressively neglected. Traditionally, Recife expected a flood about once every 15 years and that affecting only the low areas. But now they are becoming frequent, in 1965 and again in 1966. The last one not only washed through the mocambos of the poor but onto the higher land and into the homes of the middle class. Furniture was shunted hastily to the second story, and when the residents returned after the flood, they found high water marks of three to five feet inside their houses and floors mired with the river's leavings, including snakes and garbage.

Just last month, in October 1967, while I was in Recife, a major aqueduct was broken on the bed of a canal, and the whole city was without water for two days. The people stood in line for hours at the few sources in order to fill a pail to sustain their families through the day.



The Porters
Of Recife



In the same month, the mayor of Natal, another state capital in the Northeast, wrote:

"We must confess that few Brazilian cities are technically equipped to cope with the problems posed by the future. Most of them—unprepared even for the problems of the moment, their administrative structure limited by a bureaucracy formed in the first decade—can not see beyond the immediate.

"Meanwhile, some of these problems now begin to cry out: 'Solve me'."

A study group of Brazil's National Housing Bank estimated, optimistically, that only 11.6% of the country's cities have any organs dedicated to city planning and urbanization. Among those which lack such preparation are Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Belém.

The problem is not only the inadequacy of the city's physical plant to service its populace, nor the impossibility of its economic sectors to provide a means of livelihood. It is also the deficiency in the social institutions which might facilitate the migrants' integration into the city life and speed the process of secularization.

Characteristic of the Latin culture is the paucity of intermediate associations, particularly of a voluntary nature. Groups do not form spontaneously to support a cause or oppose a wrong—a characteristic de Tocqueville observed to be so typical in the United States. Reliance on self or the supreme authority are the two poles which describe the options understood by the Latin American.

Centuries of plantation psychology focused on one very firm pole of supreme authority: the patrão, the owner and/or mayordomo. Though paternalistic in the extreme, it provided the support and discipline which gave a security to the peasant. But the 20th century has broken down this structure, even for the peasant who remains on the land: the owner has moved to the city, the management relationships have become impersonal, and the traditional attachment to one landholding is broken by modern economic intrusions.

When the peasant migrates to the city, he leaves behind his primary relationships of family and friends, but he carries his plantation psychology with him—and his need for a patrão. Sometimes he finds this in a political boss whom he may come to obey as he did the plantation authority. Sometimes the transfer is to a priest.

But more times than not, he is propelled to the other pole, the self. He finds that he alone is concerned for his welfare, and his neighbors in the mocambos have found the same thing. They go their own ways, suspicious of each other, holding to their rural norms, gyrating toward paternalistic solutions when they present themselves.

A dispossessed, miserable people, the mocambo dwellers would seem to be ripe for revolution. Instead, my consistent impression from conversations concerning the situation was that a flaccid anomie reigns—an indifference

and resignation among a mass too diffident and enervated to take action.

I could not help but notice the prevalence of the Portuguese prefix des in my conversations and readings concerning the situation in the Northeast:

At SORPE (Service for Rural Orientation in Pernambuco) I was told that, besides the opposition of the plantation management, the major difficulty in organizing rural syndicates was that the peasant was descrente---disbelieving, suspicious, non-cooperative because he has been misled and exploited so often. A social worker, speaking of the difficulties of a community action program in an alagado, called the mocambo dweller "descrente".

An article in the Jornal do Brasil (Rio newspaper) on the Northeast noted the term desencanto---disenchantment, and observed:

"They are famous---those literary descriptions of mystics and bandits such as Antonio Conselheiro, Zumbi dos Palmares, and Lampião in the modern age---all a literature of disenchantment, misery, exploitation of men by men, of police oppression which wiped out families and aroused hatreds leading to the outbreak of new banditries."

In his treatise Visão do Nordeste (Vision of the Northeast), the Brazilian intellectual Alceu Amoroso Lima emphasized the state of desumanização (dehumanization):

"Suffering begins to become inhuman when we begin not to feel it. It passes the barrier of sensibility, just as jet planes now pass the sound barrier. And as the sound barrier is...silence, the barrier of sensibility is...indifference. And this signifies, neither more nor less, than dehumanization."

In talking with Manoel Correia de Andrade, leading geographer, I noted his emphasis on the condition of desarticulação---a lack of dialogue, of understanding among the various sectors of the society, and between the government and the populace.

The minority in the Northeast who are privileged avoid or confront the reality in different ways. The multifaceted pattern is not peculiarly Brazilian. It is human, and the parallel with our racial quandry is striking. There are those whose lives and that of their forefathers have been so intimately geared in to the traditional relationship that they cannot comprehend any situation but the status quo; to them any suggestion of change forebodes complete chaos. To alter this mentality is the work not of a few years but of a generation, perhaps more.

There are the myopic who, in the U.S. would have to be blind not to see the problem by this time, but who in Brazil can still exist in their oblivion because as yet overt protests have not erupted, and their lives are not directly affected by the negative conditions.

In an ICWA newsletter (FM-13) on "Family Life in Recife", a colleague described a poignant manifestation of this detachment:

"Most women lead vacuous lives...To fill idle moments and satisfy creative desire, a curious local art form, which could be described as a sign of des-

perate underemployment, flourishes amongst this sector of society. A passion for decorating useless objects to adorn the house or give as presents, and covering any shape or size of container with plastic frills, at times amounts almost to a mania...This particularly futile occupation, when so much desperately needs to be done for others, has rightly made some of the more socially aware angry...One who carries on any form of voluntary work is highly regarded by others, but they show little inclination to join in."

Unfortunately, from this passage can be extrapolated the general state of affairs among the gentry. But it is not all-pervading, and there are the sentient few who suffer, fret and work to better the situation. Some are professionals: social workers, educators, nurses, sociologists, technicians, home economists, journalists, priests and their assistants. Others are voluntary: leaders of civic organizations, students and even an occasional usineiro and his wife. Because salaries are so low, many professionals must have two and three jobs to support themselves; even so, some still find time and energy to work as volunteers as well, perhaps teaching literacy or hygiene in an alagado at night. A very high proportion of those who heed the ills of the community are women. One reason is general: of necessity men must be involved in the mundane money-making activities. But more relevant is the ratio of women to men in Recife: two years ago, I was told 7:1, this year, 8.5:1. The best men of the lower and middle classes are drawn to south Brazil by the greater job and career opportunities. It is striking in Recife how many attractive women, beyond that watershed of the 25th year, are unmarried; their work then becomes a hymeneal substitute, absorbing all their time and thought.

Some of the dedicated speak of the conditions with a sort of quiet despair. Others are overtly anguished and in a conversation become tense and animated.

When I was riding with a journalist friend of leftist leanings, she stopped her car to ask directions from a group of three ill-dressed men. Their response was begrudging and inaudible. In her compunction, she accelerated the car rapidly, saying: "They hate us---those of us with cars and they have nothing. They are right."

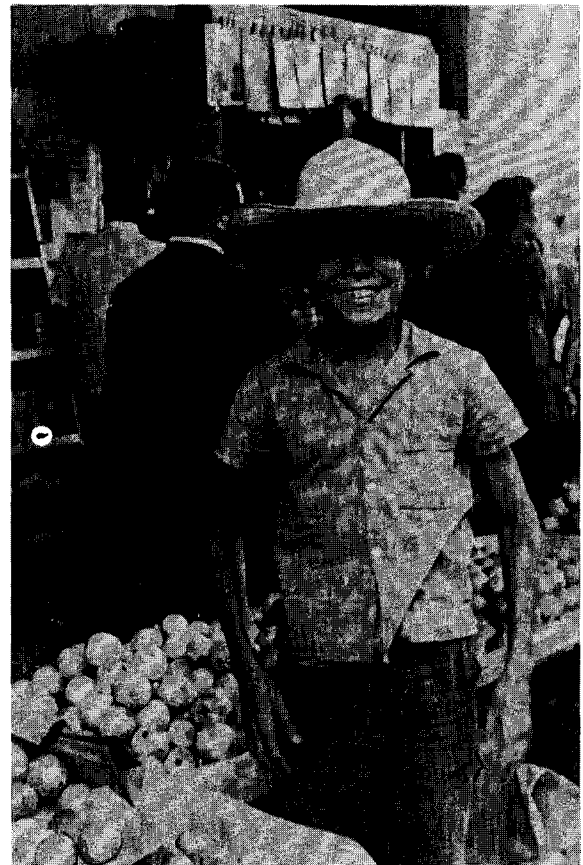
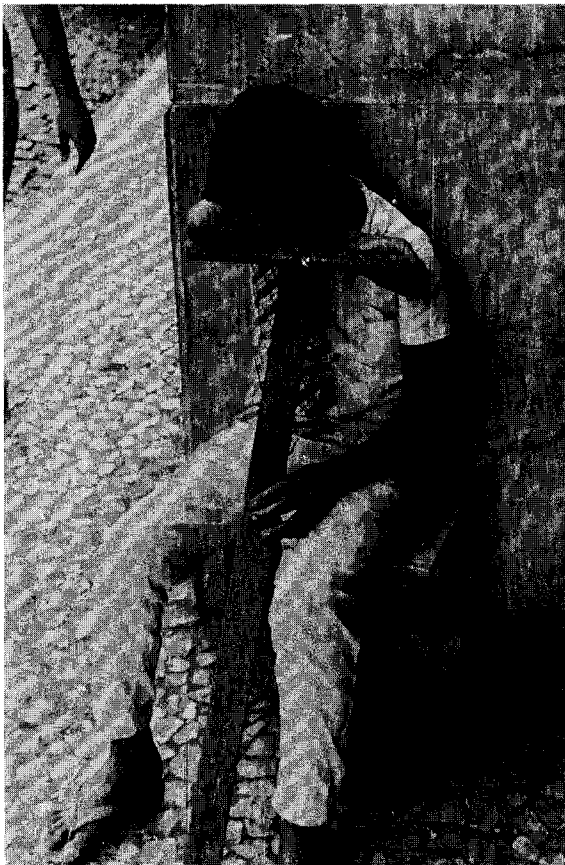
That was two years ago, and she was agitating in all possible ways to bring about a rapid transformation in the social structure. This October she seemed resigned, saying: "Only guerilla warfare---and I think it's impossible in Brazil---or three hundred years of gradual change can bring about improvement. There is no use to struggle day by day."

From shreds of comments relevant to the students I gather that they, too, have retreated, from their active involvement. For instance, the people at SORPE said that before the "Revolution" (1964) the students were protagonists in the educational program for the rural syndicates. Now, they take no part in any SORPE activity.

The 1964 "Revolution" removed much of the student leadership as



The Street
Children
Of Recife



"subversive", and police suppression continues. Students are jailed, sometimes for months, for demonstrating or distributing literature in opposition to such things as the recent university-reform accord between Brazil's Ministry of Education and the U.S. Agency of International Development.

Regardless of one's view of the students' right to protest, one must regret that their energy and organization is being expended only to oppose, particularly anything that has the slightest hint of U.S. involvement. One has the impression that the U.S. could successfully establish peace and prosperity around the world and to be obstinate the students would agitate for war and poverty "to abolish U.S. imperialism". Although permeated by leftist elements before the "Revolution", at least they were trying to construct a better Brazil, and they were imbued with a ferment of optimism. Now it has turned to vinegar, there is no enthusiasm for current programs, and there is agitation just for agitation's sake---and because it is the "in" thing to do. In their ingratiating way, the Brazilians have dubbed the phenomenon with a mildly humorous and perjorative term: esquerda festiva, the festive left.

The one articulate group whose voice continues to carry loud and far is that of the bishops of the Northeast. In my last newsletter, FMF-8, I wrote of Dom Hélder Câmara, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda, and of his important leadership role in Brazil. The most recent cause célèbre centering on him began on 25 August 1967 with his speech of acceptance of the title "Citizen of Pernambuco", delivered before the State Legislative Assembly. Dom Hélder is a master at hiding his rapiers in goose down. The speech was six pages long, single-spaced; the excerpts below, therefore, make it seem harsher than was the total effect:

"God forbid that I take advantage of this exceptional opportunity which your generosity has offered me in the name of Pernambuco in order to injure and distress our fellow-citizens, whose intentions I have no right to doubt.

"But, also, God forbid that I not take this opportunity, with your kind permission, to call attention to a matter about which, in conscience, I judge to be my duty to remind all of us.

"With no intent of indicating the guilty, making it clear that each one of us has our quota of responsibility for the present situation, it is time to ask ourselves:

"If tomorrow, Joaquim Nabuco (19th century leader of Brazil's abolition movement) were to arrive in Recife and to travel over our sugar cane area, would he or would he not feel the necessity of reopening the Abolition Campaign?

"Coming from eternity, with eyes to see and ears to hear, what would he think of the worker in the agro-industry of Pernambuco? How would he react to the salaries, so often held back? What would he say about the



An odd-jobber
clears the gutters
of Recife.

lack of remunerated days of rest, the loss of the bonus for a year's work, and the denial of legal guarantees...What would he think of us, finding men starving and in ill-health, living in houses that don't deserve the name house, without permission to plant their own subsistence plot? Would Nabuco believe that there even are some who prohibit the workers from going to school and taking part in a syndicate?"

In the address, Dom Hélder pleaded again for agrarian reform as a means of alleviating the disillusionment and suffering of the rural population, and the pressure on the cities. He lamented the "total incomprehension of the super-powers---the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.---to create effective means for the development of the underdeveloped countries." He called upon Brazil's federal government to execute the many extant laws to bring about reforms. And he warned that "many of our better young people are having greater and greater difficulty to trust in democracy, in its validity, in its ability to go beyond theory to practice...to go to the root of our socio-economic problems and resolve them."

It is said that the Commanding General of the 4th Army, headquartered in Recife, left the chamber immediately after the speech, omitting the

greeting to Dom Hélder which protocol expects. Since the Army is the most powerful element in Brazil's political scene today, the liberals of Recife interpret this as symbol of the government's position.

Two months later the speech continued the topic of heated debate, forces rigidly taking positions pro or con, just as they do regarding Dom Hélder himself. The Diário de Pernambuco published a series of five articles by Murilo Marroquim, a leading journalist (and owner of a sugar cane farm). He challenged the propriety of Dom Hélder's speech in the legislative chamber, suggested that the Archbishop should acquaint himself with the rural area before criticizing it, asked if Dom Hélder was not "a politician enamored with his own personality", lamented the difficulty of obtaining teachers in the rural area, and refuted the idea of the distribution of land to the peasants as the solution to the social problem. It was a hard-hitting attack which prompted Dom Hélder to write one of his rare defenses, he being so accustomed to sharp criticism which he deems wiser to ignore.

In a long conversation with Dom Hélder, I found him still optimistic and yet, paradoxically, seeing little progress:

"I foresee that I may be the Martin Luther King of Brazil---a voice calling for reform and being ignored---and then in their frustration with the lack of progress and improvement, our people will move beyond peaceful and lawful solutions. Our best young people are now convinced that violence is the only solution...I will not be a part of violence. I will be swept aside just as Martin Luther King has been in the U.S., and the radical leaders will take over.

"We have laws and more laws---decrees---agencies and then new agencies to do the job of the old ones---all to bring about reforms. None of them are effective."

A concerned and conscientious wife of an usineiro couched this proliferation of palliatives as an aphorism: "Brazil is like a new doctor---for one illness he prescribes 20 medicines. An experienced doctor has one medicine for 20 illnesses."

Of the "sentient few" I mentioned earlier, quite a number are alienated from the prevailing national and international situation. In the following paragraphs I will try to synthesize some of their thinking on these matters:

A great part of the group concerned and involved with the problems of the Northeast, particularly in Recife where they are most rampant, harbor a fundamental doubt as to whether the present "capitalistic system" can come to grips with the widespread disease within the society. They consider the infusions of international aid, the creation of development agencies, and the plans of the government ministries as merely an anodyne for a fulminating illness. Instead, they prescribe an immediate surgery of drastic reforms---cutting up the latifundia into family-size farms, removing the entrenched power structure and inserting just international trade relations in the place of foreign aid.

Within this group there is no love for Communism. Just as they want Brazil to break free of U.S. dominance, they do not want to jump into the fire of Russian or Chinese dominance. On the other hand, in their opinion, their own government---largely because of the massive influence of the U.S. government---is constipated by anti-Communism. They feel that both Goulart's ill-fated administration (overthrown by the "Revolution" of 1964) and Cuba's success have damaged the hope of social progress in Brazil. The demagogic excesses and the administrative incompetencies of the former president stimulated a reaction bordering on hysteria among the dominant sectors of the society; having regained the control that slipped from their hands temporarily, these elites with the Army as their shield are obsessed by an irrational suspicion of any program or cause of "popular content". Furthermore, those within the power structure, who could never be expected to sanction meaningful reforms, now cast the onus of "subversive" on reform proposals since similar proposals under Goulart were allegedly besmirched by Communist hands.

Although admired for itself, the Castro experiment, ironically, has hampered the work of social reformers in other Latin American countries. The Brazilians with their deft ability to stretch their language have coined yet another word: encubanzar. The foreign policy of Washington is presumed to be guided by one exclusive objective: limit and destroy Communism. Therefore, the U.S. government has enjoined Brazil that it must not encubanzar, become another Cuba. And, Brazil---being both politically and economically dependent on the U.S.---fulfills its satellite obligations by an exaggerated reaction to any manifestation which might displease the U.S.

Although the present government of Brazil maintains a facade of democracy, it has bestowed upon itself absolute powers which are not imposed at all times, but are brought to bear at the executive will and which exert a latent and inhibiting control at all times. With a stoic pessimism this group sees the state evolving toward a form of neo-fascism, or at least embodying such a potential. There is a general cynicism about the political situation which in other countries might well come to the surface as frustrated anger but which in Brazil continues contained or finds outlet through the national sense of humor which is one of the charming characteristics of the people. For example---

"Efficiency:

"In the United States the result of presidential elections is known six hours later.

"In Brazil, six months before."

Exactly because of this restraint---or as even Brazilians say, the less admirable trait of passivity---it seems unlikely that a potentially explosive combination will fuse: a discontended element within the middle class and a dispossessed lower class. The slum

dwellers of Recife are not yet capable of gestating their own leadership; as Dom Hélder says, "they cannot really be called 'a people'---they are still 'a mass'." A Brazilian social worker who visited U.S. slums observed a considerable difference in the levels of poverty in the two countries: "In Recife our alagados have no water supply whatsoever; in the United States, the Negroes complained because they did not have hot water." It would seem that it is when people start moving up on the social and economic ladder that they pick up speed in their demands. In the Northeast the lowest stratum has hardly reached the bottom rung and has not begun to aggregate and articulate its own interests.

The outsiders who might stimulate overt protest, instead, seem resigned to the situation as it is. The group whose theories I described above had their hopes sullied by the Goulart mire and the 1964 countermovement. But no Brazilian with whom I talked in Recife could suggest a feasible solution. They foresee that economic conditions for the dispossessed will continue to worsen and the social structure will continue rigid. However, given the passivity of the masses and the absolute power of the system, they do not expect violence. Caught in this vise, the pariah will continue to evolve toward his own saída (way out): starvation.

Should some catalyst bring about a reaction---for instance, a depression, excessive government oppression, a pocket of guerillas---a twisted image comes to mind: the streets, sidewalks and gutters of Recife overrun with beggars, pedlars and prostitutes in delft blue mini-skirts, barking not their wares but their demands---a mobilization of the dross of the Northeast reminiscent of de Sade's exhortation of the inmates of Charenton.

Sincerely yours,

Frances M. Foland

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Photos: FMF

Map: copied from "Map of Brazil", C.S. Hammond & Co.

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