

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Recife, Pernambuco
21 December 1965

FM-1

Impressions of six days in Rio

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Ordem e Progresso: it is ironical that Brazil, the only country in the world to have words on its national flag, should have such an inscription. They are not the words that spring most readily to mind after spending a week in Rio. To the stranger here there certainly seem to be some striking aspects of material "progresso" but the "ordem" was much more difficult to locate. As an European, and not a Latin one at that, here are some first, and I would hasten to admit, probably mistaken impressions.

We sailed into Rio very early in the morning, before the clouds had lifted from the Corcovado. The whole view, skyscrapers, mountains and sea in different shades of pale blue and white, was extraordinarily beautiful and looked like a Japanese water colour. Unlike a great many places, familiar from innumerable descriptions and pictures, Rio physically lived up to all expectations. The ship sailed slowly up the Bay past merchant ships and the Minas Gerais, Brazil's single but notorious aircraft carrier, called by the Cariocas, with their characteristic wit, the Bel Antonio. The arm chairs on the decks looked surrealist. She appeared rather forlorn.

The air of peace and tranquillity was rapidly dispelled, however, as we disembarked, and was never to return. One of the things that struck me very early on was the fact that Brazilians genuinely seem to love noise and movimento, and that silence is an unnatural state.

Our introduction to the need for "jeito" (the art of manipulation and "know-how") came immediately and forcefully. We had been warned in England that Brazil was a country of graft and connexions, but I had underestimated its extent. We arrived at the customs shed and were told that we would have to pay large sums on some of our more valuable items. In most European customs one would have complied unquestioningly with any demands, knowing full well that argument was pointless, but in Rio things were different. We were lucky enough to be met by no less than four individuals, one of whom was a despachante (a professional middle man between the bureaucracy and the traveller). After an hour of wheedling, coaxing, tactful pauses and a great deal of patience, our claim that all our goods were needed for research and for our personal use was finally accepted, and we had to pay nothing. Throughout the entire procedure, the personal element was clearly of the greatest importance, and what finally tipped the balance, I suspect, was the friendship between the customs man and the despachante. Bribery has now apparently been almost entirely eliminated from the customs, and customs officials are now given 50% of all duty taken; this has made bribery a financially unrewarding alternative.

These needs for "jeito" and connexions were, in retrospect, one of the strongest causes for one's feelings of "culture shock." We were faced with the task of getting ourselves up to Recife, 1400 miles away, as quickly and

as cheaply as possible. There is a bus service up to the North East which takes five days, but we were warned that there was an outbreak of bubonic plague en route, somewhere in the south of Bahia; five days were also more than we could afford. It became apparent that the only feasible way was by air but it was equally clear that cheap or free flights with the Brazilian Air Force could not be arranged through the official channels owing to the pre-Christmas holiday rush. Therefore we spent five days using all the connexions we could find, and learning to manoeuvre our way around officialdom. While accusations are levelled at politicians and industrialists in England that "old boy nets" and other connexions play too large a role in their decisions, it became clear that to make any bureaucratic move in Brazil it is absolutely essential to have and to make use of a large number of friends and relatives to attain one's objective. At the same time infinite patience and optimism are needed to keep one going.

The racial problem, or rather situation, in Brazil has been analysed at length by many people. Some Brazilians that I talked to on the subject felt that much of the work on race in Brazil done by Americans and other foreigners had failed to distinguish many of the finer characteristics of the situation. During our six days in Rio three points struck me. Firstly, there is an extraordinary variety of facial types and skin colours. This was so marked that I have found it impossible to picture a stereotyped Brazilian. There also seemed to be no overt signs whatever of intolerance or tension between those of different colour: they travelled, ate, worked, and played football together. Secondly, however, on closer observation, one could predict after some time that the more menial the job the more likely it was to be held by a dark-skinned person. I also saw very few black people in the more expensive restaurants, and very few light skins in the favelas (slums). Although, of course, this can be partially explained by the vicious circle of poverty, little education, poor job, I felt that this was not the whole answer to what appeared to be a hard and fast rule in the city. A third aspect of the situation which struck me is typified by the following story. A relatively highly educated Carioca girl pointed out to me with pride the day we arrived that "Brazil has no racial problem, nor any racial prejudice." Yet, a couple of hours later she was discussing, without any solicitation from me, the facial features of her family in great detail and ended by pulling down the trousers of her nephew and saying, "But see how white he really is." This paradox of very strong awareness of facial characteristics and colour, coupled with comparative tolerance was brought home to me very vividly.

State politics was a frequent topic of conversation, and one that aroused strong feelings. Conversation inevitably centred around the activities of Governor Carlos Lacerda, the controversial late governor of Guanabara. Opinions ranged from those who thought that he had achieved a great deal to those who felt he had wasted the state's money and had only succeeded in leaving it heavily in debt. My first-hand impressions were that at least in terms of material construction he had done a great deal:

in almost every street there was a huge hoarding on a building site or recently completed building with the name of the governor at the top. Moreover, the six-lane highway and public recreation area in Flamengo, together with numerous other major engineering feats, had been carried out under him. The following incident illustrates the personal control that he exercised over public services and also shows the lack of continuity prevalent in so much of Brazil's administration. A friend of mine clambered onto a bus, already far too full. He asked the conductor how many standing passengers the bus was meant to carry. The conductor said that he did not know, and when it was pointed out that the number was written up, he replied, "Oh, that was fixed by Lacerda and he is no longer with us." This same attitude was evident in the general disregard of traffic regulations. Cars were beginning to disregard red traffic lights, and speed limits were ignored.

Rio struck me as a fast, flashy, and materialistic city. At a certain level it is extremely sophisticated. The number of skyscrapers, wide avenues and flashing advertisements were among the first things one noticed, but as one ceased to be dazzled by this ultra-modernity, the forest of favelas covering the urban mountainsides gradually revealed themselves, until one became aware that they are almost eating into the gardens of large villas and are just as much an integral part of Rio as the flats and blocks on the low ground. The beaches are magnificent and are important social focal points. Cariocas seemed to be peculiarly beach-orientated, and enormous pride was justifiably taken in pointing out their beauties. Clearly much time is spent on the beaches by people of all ages and classes. We met one professional man, who as a young man had spent every day on the beach for eight consecutive months, and he maintained that others of his generation had done likewise.

Another social phenomenon in Rio that I noticed was the prestige and importance attached to belonging to a "clube". These are basically sports clubs with swimming baths, tennis courts, and other facilities, and a bar and restaurant which are also used for entertainment at night. Membership of such clubs is far from cheap: one that we visited had a life membership fee of over £600. However, such membership is regarded as an investment since its value increases and later it can be either sold for a profit or handed on to one's children.

The city seemed to me to live very much for the present and to look towards the future rather than to the past. Its handsome old colonial buildings are, with very few exceptions, sadly neglected if they have not already been pulled down. The old palace, for example, a fine seventeenth century building, has become the post office headquarters. It is covered with a thick net of telephone wires, the courtyard is painted a hideous bright green, while air-conditioning units have destroyed the symmetry of its elevations. On the other hand, a great deal of the modern architecture

is most impressive. The skyscrapers in the commercial quarter are extremely bold, varied, and exciting.

The Cariocas seemed to me to be very inward looking, and to have their interests centred almost exclusively on Rio. Remarkably little knowledge or enthusiasm was expressed for the rest of the country by those that I met, and surprisingly few had ever been north of Bahia or had any intention of going there. Newspapers devoted much more space to European and North American affairs than to the rest of the continent, and when I attempted to talk about the other countries in Latin America, very little interest could be aroused.

Not unsurprisingly, I still find the reactions, mannerisms, attitudes and character of Brazilians extraordinarily enigmatic, and extremely difficult to understand. To put down on paper my present impressions would be to dangerously harden what is still a highly confused jumble of ideas. I tentatively put forward the following observations. I felt that most of the Cariocas I encountered had much in common with the English stereotyped Irishman. They were indirect and had a tendency to tell you what they thought you would like to hear. They seemed to enjoy words and rhetoric, were often extremely superficial and far too plausible in explanation. They were warm and extrovert, liked holding the stage, and disliked listening to others. I have also yet to hear a Carioca - or indeed a Brazilian - confess that he did not know the answer when confronted with any particular question. The process of making friends is an easy matter; I do not know whether close friendships will be made as easily.

The next two years promise to be immensely interesting, not least because I have a long way to go before I shall feel in any sense integrated into Brazilian life.

Yours sincerely,

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Received in New York January 3, 1966