

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Impressions of Brazilian Attitudes
to Local American Activities.

Recife,
Pernambuco.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The era of British activity flourished here until the end of World War II, but has as its lasting monuments the British Country Club and the British Cemetery. Membership of the Club is about the most coveted of any, and is consequently the most expensive: to be seen taking tea there is still the ambition of certain sectors of Recife society. But apart from the name, the cricket pitch, and the photograph of H.M. the Queen, there is little to betray its origins.

Only the Western Telegraph Company and the Bank of London and South America keep more than a couple of permanent representatives here, and they together with the few emigres who came to work for British firms long since bought up, or who came to work for local firms, sit in a small huddle on Sunday afternoons, drinking rather strong Indian tea. They still regard the Club as their own, and mingle little with the smart, rich Brazilian members, who by weight of numbers have taken over the presidency for the past ten years.

During the Second World War the picture changed. Large numbers of American air force men were stationed in Recife, and the airport became an important staging post in the South Atlantic, whilst the British trickled home, never to return. But that American invasion was to be only temporary, and a forewarning of what was to come.

Deep interest in North East Brazil was only shown in 1960 after ten years of isolated instances of support, mainly financial, from the Brazilian Point Four programme, the Export Import Bank, and other development organisations. Alarm at the situation in Cuba, and consequent interest in Latin America was suddenly focussed on North East Brazil with the publicity given to Juliao and the Peasant Leagues. This erupted just before the Alliance for Progress was inaugurated; and after a number of top level visits between the United States and Brazil, a most ambitious aid programme for the North East was launched, which despite the ups and downs of the political situation, is still very much in force.

Arriving here nearly five years after its initiation, I was astounded at the impact made by Americans on the area. The winged sign of the Alliance is evident on goods ranging from ambulances to factories, and USAID has affected directly or indirectly the lives of most people in the North East. Not only the aid itself, but from it American influence

on industry, technology, education, culture, and in fact almost everything except ideals, have seeped into and permeated the life of the North East.

The myth of Kennedy is still very much alive here. Part of his charismatic appeal may be attributed to his widely reported ability and personal charm, but some of it is probably due to the fact that it was he who first effectively championed the cause of the North East, bringing in the aid programme. Although many Brazilians, perhaps most Brazilians, are cynical about the motivation behind the sudden interest and the influx of financial aid, the personal myth of Kennedy himself remains intact.

The help manifests itself most clearly in the infrastructure. Almost all the road building machinery appears to come from the States, primary schools are being built with American money, The Paulo Afonso hydro-electric project has received large contributions from Washington, the programme for the eradication of malaria has been largely financed by the States, and advisers and technicians in almost all walks of life have been sent to help the Brazilians. Privately owned machinery is mainly American, consumer durables are mostly American, or even if now manufactured in Brazil, usually have an American parent firm. American films shown in the cinemas outnumber the Brazilian, and American songs dominate the radio programmes.

A crude distinction can be drawn between the official and the independent American activities in the area. The former are carried out primarily through the USAID Alliance for Progress team, and through the Peace Corps, whose volunteers are almost equally widespread though thinner on the ground. Of the unofficial influences, much the most important is the influx of private industry which has sprouted up with great and continuing success although a considerable amount of less conspicuous help is also being carried out in the interior by the various missionary bodies. Finally, American influence is being spread by the private technicians and academics invited to the area, and as a result of the ever increasing number of trips made by Brazilians to the United States.

With such a welter of American activities, and with such intricate American-Brazilian relations as a result, it would be impossible to describe these relationships with any objective accuracy. Nevertheless, a mixture of first hand observations and the stated viewpoints of Brazilian acquaintances on the subject may go some way to outlining a situation which is of undisputable importance to both countries.

It seems to me that the situation is not altogether a happy one, and tension is never far beneath the surface. But the object of aid is not to receive gratitude, and the donor country would not expect it. The relationship between host and donor countries is always a delicate one; no country likes to be in a position where she is at least morally indebted to another. To accept aid is to accept unsolicited patronisation, and certain obligations to the donor country arise which would not otherwise have been felt. But for a country so desperately in need of money and technical help as the North East of Brazil was six years ago, and still is, to refuse aid would have been out of the question.

Therefore, although at one level the aid is obviously much appreciated, at another little gratitude is felt or expressed. After aid has in principle

been accepted, the innumerable arguments over the uses to which it should be put arise, the order of priorities, the amount of strings attached by the donor country, and the amount of choice in its distribution to be exercised by the receiving country. Ultimately the power lies in the hands of the donor who can always withhold the aid if the receiver does not agree to the conditions. This tends to lead to some bitterness and cynicism from recipients who feel that an outsider, with little right to do so, is controlling the internal affairs of their country.

Of all the people with whom I have talked about their feelings towards American activities in the area, the most heated, lucid and voluble have undoubtedly been professionals, mainly lawyers, doctors and academic teachers. Without taking up any one political standpoint, they have all expressed intense dislike, combined in some cases with fear, of the Americanisation taking place and making such visible progress in front of their eyes, while they can only look on impotently.

Amongst these people there often seems to be a basic confusion between the official activity sponsored by the United States Government, and the private enterprise, and consequently a failure to distinguish the political and economic influences of these two types of activity. This confusion is partially justifiable, since in both official and unofficial activities the final control lies in the hands of SUDENE. Almost all United States aid is channelled through SUDENE and not distributed directly, whilst at the same time the applications for tax rebates and other advantages offered to private firms setting up in the area are also handled by them.

The most vehement feelings that I have heard expressed are the political. The sole purpose of the United States in providing aid is political, and any good that it may do to the Brazilian people is purely incidental. One professor has asserted several times that the 1964 Revolution was organised by the Americans for their own ends. He has even, he maintains, seen a picture of an American general being congratulated for his part in provoking it.

This is the view of an extremist, but several others, by no means militant leftists, have complained that the Americans are attempting to strengthen the existing military junta in order to have some continuity in Brazilian politics at the expense of any social progress. They admit that before the Revolution the Americans had some cause to fear extremist left-wing action, but since then there has been nothing to justify their support of the reactionary forces in power.

Moreover, after the Americans had carefully won back the confidence of Brazilians after the Cuban episode, the more educated upper and middle classes had their rising faith shattered by the fiasco in the Dominican Republic, which was not helped by their own government contributing forces. This action has both outraged and scared them, and looms considerably larger in their minds than the war in Vietnam, as it is both nearer home and a situation more analogous to their own. By putting a foot wrong, they fear that their own fate could be much the same. One highly successful lawyer friend spent an hour attacking the actions of Americans in his country, and expanded on the exclusively political interests of the gifts

by declaring, among other things, that the priority being given to the roadbuilding programme was to prevent effective guerrilla warfare in the event of a revolution.

Several acquaintances, including one of the most distinguished doctors in the North East, have told me that any appearance of generosity in the aid programme is completely false. Firstly, the money given to Brazil is only a fraction of the amount taken out in industrial profits: the gifts are a slight atonement for the Americans' guilt at robbing the Brazilians. Secondly, most of the money has so many strings attached to it that it benefits the United States ~~at~~ least as much as the recipients. Far more American goods are bought than would be otherwise, and there is no possibility of buying better or cheaper goods from elsewhere.

The first fact may be true, that money pumped back into Brazil is less than that taken out, but it does not discredit the repayment which is in no sense obligatory. That a country should have a conscience without an interest at stake is a questionable concept. The second point has perhaps more foundation, and it must be admitted that the Americans not unnaturally have made some of what the more charitable would call mistakes.

The most serious of these misfires locally, and the one most widely discussed is COPERBO, the huge, shining and in situ surrealist factory for producing synthetic rubber that lies twenty miles south of Recife. A large hoarding outside proudly boasts the financial help received from the Alliance, which together with SUDENE was responsible for its construction. For some time before the Revolution Celso Furtado as head of SUDENE had refused it despite pressure from the United States and other interested bodies. After he had been exiled, talks were resumed, and it was arranged to buy what was, even with the help from the American people, a very expensive factory.

Why? Two reasons alone should have been enough to prevent it. Firstly it is designed to produce synthetic rubber from alcohol, a by-product of sugar, which only further encourages sugar production when official policy is directed at diversifying the crops in the area. Secondly there is a crying need for labour intensive not capital intensive industries, and COPERBO cannot be said to fall into this former category. Moreover, on account of the poisonous fumes given off, some of the ~~employees~~ have to be changed every six months, so that even the few local men employed are not all given permanent jobs.

But more disastrous than any of these reasons, it has recently been admitted that COPERBO can never pay its way. In the early stages the losses were attributed to teething troubles that would cure themselves with time, but as time went on and the situation did not improve, it became clear that a profit could never be made, as the price of alcohol is too high to enable it to compete with other methods of producing synthetic rubber.

To complete the story, a visiting American sociologist recently told me of its origins. The factory had been erected and operated in Illinois, but the waste given off had so polluted the water for a wide area in the Lakes that the resultant outcry had forced it to be removed. The Brazilians were susceptible enough to buy this expensive white elephant, which not

only costs SUDENE a great deal to keep running, but has succeeded in polluting and discolouring a wide area of sea, ruining the inhabitants of two formerly flourishing fishing communities nearby.

The Brazilians are justifiably indignant that a lot of their precious money has been wasted; nevertheless, whatever the intention of the Americans, philanthropic or otherwise, the Brazilians never appear to blame their own officials for accepting it. It is hard to believe that nothing was known of its history before it arrived, not that some economic research into its profitability had not been made.

Several academics I have met have complained that they dislike the feeling that 'Big brother is watching them', and have the impression that most Americans are here, at any rate partly, to spy on them. The Peace Corps especially are thought to be far too closely connected to the State Department for them not to be also part-time CIA agents, and there is considerable mistrust of their motives. It is perhaps unfortunate that they are so highly organised, as this inevitably builds up the impression that they are linked with government organs. On one occasion, shortly after we arrived, my husband, introduced simply by name to a woman anthropologist here, immediately apologised for not speaking English, and broke into rapid Portuguese with their mutual friend. However, when this latter explained that Simon was 'contra paz', she then, to his amazement, started speaking excellent English.

Amongst the middle and upper classes I have frequently had the impression that they ally themselves more closely with European culture than North American. Many times I have noticed them refer to the Americans as 'children' who come as naive optimists, unable to appreciate the delicacy and complication of the problems with which they are faced. They feel that Americans should put their own house in order before interfering and trying to do so in other countries. They take an especially deep interest in the racial problems in the United States, perhaps with a slightly smug feeling of their own success in this particular sphere. The situation in Vietnam is rarely mentioned except in conjunction with complaints of American neo-colonialism and American policy towards Brazil. Little is said about the war per se.

On the whole I have detected a rather destructive attitude towards the problem of American policy in Brazil. I have heard no reasonable alternatives put forward to United States aid for rapid development of the country. Students, the one group among which I had hoped to hear some fresh ideas, I have found singularly disappointing. One student friend, I suspect typical of many, has expressed his irritation with the misplaced enthusiasm of the Americans, who are in his opinion, simply interfering and making things worse. But his view of the situation was apathetic in the extreme. He thought that there was no point in any individual trying to improve things on his own. The magnitude of the problem was such that starting a school or hospital would be only scratching the surface, and the results so small that it would not be worth the effort.

His negative solution, therefore, was to sit back and do nothing, waiting for matters to right themselves. This would happen spontaneously when the population pressure and further deterioration in living conditions

resulted in a Marxist type revolution, and only by such a drastic method would results be achieved. He was not intending to do anything about it, but thought that sheer neglect would bring it about in due course.

I have found very few signs of a social conscience among students, although this may be partly due to the tense political situation and the fear of having their names associated with the left wing, from which many have already suffered. Certainly the only common enthusiasms expressed by this body has been for their own internal politics.

The feelings towards Americans in the interior are rather different, especially among the poor. All the peasants with whom I have talked have a visionary picture of the United States being a land of untold wealth that has everything. Brazil is a poor country, and therefore as the Americans have more than enough for themselves, they think it only right that they should help their less fortunate neighbours. For this reason they receive aid in any form passively, without questioning the motives, and with little gratitude. The aid, once offered, is considered fair meat for all, and thus, especially in the final stages of the distribution of aid in kind such as foodstuffs, it tends to go to those with most jeito rather than those with most need.

However, although the system is often abused without doubt, it is, as far as I can see, on a very local basis; and it is a matter of the poor depriving the needier, rather than the rich depriving the poor. The only case of food going seriously astray that I know of was of an English bank accountant receiving free oil via his maid who "thought only of saving her master's money!" Otherwise it is a question of the local schoolmistress distributing the food to her friends who come and ask for it rather than seeking out the poorest members of the community.

We have one comadre who has become a self-styled expert at receiving aid. During the floods she would strip the clothes off her children so that volunteers would take pity on them seeing them naked. This process was repeated with such success that she proudly maintains that she was considerably better off after the floods than beforehand. Encouraged by these initial ventures, although she can read and write, she has now signed herself on for a night school for illiterate adults in order to obtain the free food being distributed to all the pupils.

But at the same time as this aid is readily accepted, fears of the political motives of the Americans have seeped through, even to the most ignorant and isolated. There is a universal suspicion that the Americans have come to exploit the country's numerous hidden natural resources, and buy up Brazil. Periodic rumours are spread of how the Americans are coming to buy the coastal coconut plantations, and to found large fishing companies which would harm the local fishing industry. One of the largest sugar usinas has recently contracted an American firm to carry out a time and motion study on the factory. The project is surrounded by rumours, which range from one that is definitely erroneous, that the usina has already been bought by the Americans, to one that the survey is being carried out as a pilot study to discover whether the Americans should buy up the whole of the antiquated sugar industry in the North East. One American postgraduate friend doing research into agricultural extension schemes in the interior

found that as soon as he made it known that he was American, Brazilians became so guarded in their replies that after a while he was compelled to say that he was Canadian to make any progress.

Several maids and small shopkeepers have produced long soliloquies about the wonderful Americans, and how good everything American is, whilst decrying everything to do with Brazil. More than once a stranger has come up to me on the bus, and taking great pride in his broken English, given me a eulogy of things American. When I have pointed out that I am not American, the tone has changed, and he has started contradicting himself.

Amongst the urban Recifenses I have found considerable resentment and jealousy at the effects of American families moving into the city. They have tended to congregate in the suburb that lies along the only beach, and although prices of accommodation were always fairly high, external competition has now pushed them up far beyond the means of all but the very richest Recifenses. As a result, the area has now become the seat of the foreign colony which is in fact predominantly American, so much so, that some blocks now have 'Please keep off the grass' written only in English. This influx of wealth has brought smarter, though extremely expensive shops, and, a frequent cause of complaint, pushed up the price of maids. The Americans, with justification, were appalled at the low wages paid to servants, and by putting up the price, have managed to bid away some of the best from Brazilian families.

Members of the middle classes have often told me that they feel hurt that the Americans live in their air-conditioned cocoons, mingling only with each other and never trying to make contact with Brazilians or interest themselves in Brazil. For weeks on end wives never leave the residential suburb, but shop locally or send the maids into town, and the children are sent to the American school. The American, impatient at power failures, and with his fetish of cleanliness - I met a couple who filtered and boiled water for twenty minutes before making coffee with it - irritate the Brazilians, who feel that they have managed to survive quite well despite their worms.

But this is only one side of the picture. Not unsurprisingly Americans feel that they have more in common with fellow Americans than with most Recifenses, but I have met several who have told me how they have tried to make social contact with local people and had all their attempts rebuffed. Feeling hurt and discouraged, they have given up. There are often language problems; although the head of the family is usually taught, wives have to pick it up slowly as they go along. Moreover, Recifenses rarely invite people outside their own family home for meals.

All these criticisms of American activity in Brazil are mixed with a very real admiration of many aspects of American life, which, certainly in the field of education and technology seems universal. Invitations or scholarships to visit America are highly coveted. No ambitious academic regards his training as complete without a visit to the States to obtain a further degree, and at least unofficially, American degrees are rated more highly than any Brazilian ones. American academics are equally admired and will draw comparatively large audiences, although I have detected a tendency among Brazilians to feel that they are being patronised by the Americans, who with little humility, tell them how to solve their own problems.

A doctor friend, referring to American doctors sent to help with local problems, put the difficulties entailed very reasonably. He pointed out that despite the indisputably superior training given to members of his profession in other countries, especially the States, there were certain fields, above all relating to problems in tropical countries, where his compatriots' practical

experience was worth more than a great deal of isolated laboratory research. Outsiders sent to advise on their problems tend to put themselves in a superior position, criticising existing conditions, but are unable to appreciate the difficulties, as presented by the local experts, forestalling improvement. It is difficult to strike a happy balance between looking at a problem as an outsider and therefore not being bound by local conceptual limitations, whilst at the same time taking into consideration obstacles visible only to those who have had local experience of the problem.

However, what is less excusable are the instances of plain bad manners shown to individuals and institutions. A visiting American sociologist offered to give a series of lectures at a certain institute which were gratefully accepted. After giving a few of these, he disappeared without even saying farewell, thus leaving a rather sour taste with the already hyper-sensitive academics. Another time, four Fulbright scholars, touring Brazil spent a few days in Recife with the object of 'doing' the city, seeing the sights and visiting the local big names. They systematically interviewed the latter, with, as far as I can see, little object other than to say that they had met them. When it was pointed out that these people were mostly extremely busy they were unperturbed, and were only put out when, at the last moment, one man said that he was ill and unable to see them.

Technology is universally respected, and almost everything manufactured in the United States is thought, usually rightly, superior to the Brazilian equivalent. It is only when American firms start competing locally that I have been aware of resentment, especially when Americans cash in on tax rebates offered in the North East. Moreover, because they are already established and reputable, it is often easier for them to obtain these concessions than for local Brazilian enterprises.

My own feelings, superimposed on all this, are that the Americans are undoubtedly doing a lot of good, but their method of approach is sometimes unfortunate and their work suffers as a result. An American missionary said to me recently:

"Tell them (the Brazilians) they are backward and primitive. They already know that they are, and they want to be developed."

Who likes to be told this whether they know it or not?

This instance has stuck in my mind because it was so extreme, but it is an exaggeration, not a falsification, of the attitude of many. The situation is delicate, and the dislike, especially amongst intellectuals here, of the present regime, with its close ties to United States, does not increase the popularity of either.

It is not for nothing that ARENA, the government party, is said to stand for "Assim Resolvemos Entregá-nos aos Americanos" (Thus we have resolved to give ourselves to the Americans), and that Roberto Campos, the dynamic Minister of Planning, is known contemptuously by Cariocas as Bobby Fields.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell

Fanny Mitchell.