

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB:32 Some students discuss
the United States

Prudente de Morais 805, c/6
Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro
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Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Students are an influential group in Brazil because the very fact that they have reached University level makes them a part of the small number of educated Brazilians. No matter what kind of students they are, they tend to be politically conscious. While as a group they support no political party they do have feelings about issues and are very sensitive to their country's social and economic needs. Many are highly idealistic and because of this have become cynical about their own leaders and hyper-critical of anything that falls short of perfection.

Before I met with students in Brazilia and in Minas Gerais, where I had been invited to discuss race relations in the United States, I had been informed that the most virulent opponents of our country were "under wraps" since the April 1st Revolution. So while I didn't encounter any emotional outbursts against the States as I have among frustrated students in South Africa, I did find critical attitudes I thought interesting to explore.

While the students admire the United States as a nation that can help Brazil they distrust us because of the influence we can wield through our aid. They are very much aware that the United States is a "have" country while Brazil is still among the "have nots". This makes them suspicious because from their experience the rich and the powerful have always taken advantage of the poor. The United States means "big business" and they reason we would not be interested in Brazil unless we had found their country suitable for exploitation. They look on American business interests here distrustfully, finding it easy to believe that they have stood in the way of Brazilian development. "While your country gives us aid with one hand it takes out more than it gives with the other."

Many students had given their support to Joao Goulart's communist-inclined Government not because they were communists but because of his Government's promise of social reform and its proposed take-over of a number of American power companies and other businesses. While there were communists among the student leaders, many students believed Goulart was moving in the right direction because he would give Brazilians greater democratic opportunities free from foreign influence. They are convinced that the great difficulties which Goulart encountered and his Government's ultimate defeat was greatly influenced by the United States. As proof they cite America's quick recognition of Brazil's new Government.

The students I talked with had a great surface understanding of American affairs but it soon became apparent that they had little knowledge of our country beyond the daily headlines. As we Americans often project the context of our experience mistakenly onto Latin America so the Brazilian students often projected their own society onto ours, causing tremendous misunderstandings.

Brazilian society is a class order where, in spite of some improvement, a great gulf still separates the well-to-do from the poor and where the economy has tended to make the rich richer and the poor, by comparison, poorer. They do not need any help from the communists to think in terms of a "class struggle" and "economic exploitation" although communism speaking in such terms is attractive to some students. They reject capitalism because to them it has nothing to do with democracy but is only a means of economic exploitation. Thus some students are convinced that the States, although more developed than Brazil, has the same class problem. They believe that since we are a capitalistic society there must be an exploited lower class. At present it is hidden behind the racial problem; "Once your racial distinctions become less important your class distinctions will become more clear." I was asked, "Will not the recognition of the Negro's equality give rise to a class struggle?" and "Is it not possible that racial strife in the United States is fomented by the authorities in order to avoid class war?"

There was a common assumption that our President has more power than he actually has; that he has the right to interfere in any state which attempts to act against the Constitution and/or the will of the federal government. The students knew very little of the judicial proceedings which have to be instigated in order to stop a state from interfering with a citizen's constitutional rights. To many of them it was a simple matter: if you are for racial equality you enforce the Constitution, if you are not, you don't. Thus the question, "If the Constitution guarantees integration why has not such a provision been carried out?" and "Why hasn't the President of the United States made the Southern states obey the Constitution?" From their own experience they assume there must be some duplicity here.

They couldn't understand why our Government tolerated the existence of racist or anti-democratic groups. "Hasn't any thought been given to the elimination of such heinous societies as the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society?" Again, from experience, they presumed that there was no room in a democratic state for such opposition and were surprised that they might also be presumed to have constitutional rights.

They believed that "within twenty years the Negroes will constitute the majority of the population of the United States" because they assumed that today Negroes make up about 40% of our population. On the basis of this inaccuracy they had concluded that we deliberately play down the Negro's participation in American life. Otherwise

Negroes would be about equally distributed in numbers with Whites. Even their idea of what a "Negro" was in the United States was vague. They had projected the definition which Brazilians use for "Negro", a black skinned person with Negroid features. They were surprised to find that some of them, light-brown Brazilians, would be discriminated against in the States because of their ancestry.

I was told that Brazilians learned a biological fact some time ago which North Americans must come to realize: that the mixing of the races does not create inferior people but, on the contrary, superior types. "Would not racial segregation create in the United States a biogenetic type that might threaten the human race, that is, its continuation?" "Are not races intended to intermingle since each contains elements which, if maintained in isolation or allowed to accumulate owing to lack of cross breeding, may jeopardize the integrity of the human race?" I admitted that we had much to learn.

It is very difficult for these young Brazilians to believe that any positive steps are being taken to improve race relations. To them the new Civil Rights Bill is cancelled out by the candidacy of Senator Barry Goldwater, whom they consider a racial bigot. His nomination indicates to them that race relations in our country are not improving but actually heading in the wrong direction. "How would you explain the meteoric rise of Senator Goldwater and his choice as representative of a party in which men like Abraham Lincoln fought against racism?" "Wouldn't his election represent in the eyes of the world a regression in the 'democratization' of the USA?"

"How do Americans feel when they propose to the world that it fight for the fundamental liberties of man in contrast with their own situation of having reached the 20th century without resolving their own problems?" "Don't you consider the spending of billions of dollars for the armed forces to interfere in the lives of people distant from your land, such as Vietnam and the Congo, and only a million dollars to fight the social problems of Negroes and Whites within the United States is wrong?" Bringing the United States off its pedestal with questions like these enhances the pride the students have in their own country. "We are not as developed as you are but at least Brazilians know how to get along with each other; our problems are economic and educational, not racial." "As the US gives aid for our material underdevelopment perhaps we can give aid to you for America's moral underdevelopment." A kind of Brazilian Peace Corps, perhaps.

Again and again it seemed to me that in spite of the critical tenor of the questions the students really wanted to believe that the United States was a golden democratic land. Perfectionists, they were disappointed that we were not perfect; we appear inconsistent to them partly because of their lack of knowledge, partly because we do often do things out of un-democratic self-interest, but mostly

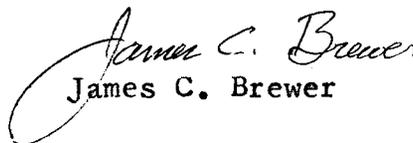
because we are not able to live up to the unattainably high ideals which we say we stand for. They see things in terms of black and white, and anything short of their ideal of democracy, whether in our country or theirs, disillusioned them.

Jack Kennedy is their idol. They do not believe for a minute the American story of his death. "It is clear that the death of former President John Kennedy was pre-meditated (and carefully so). Was not one of the reasons for this the former President's active leadership in favor of racial integration?" When I denied any evidence that this was so I got the greatest reaction of my trip. An auditorium full of students at the University of Brasilia all shouted that I was wrong. From their experience things like this do not just happen; they are planned for someone's gain. It is difficult for them to accept Kennedy's assassination as just the quirk of a maladjusted man. President Kennedy meant too much to them. He was in a very real sense the personification of their idealism. They are anti-American big business and they read about how Kennedy took on the large steel companies and defeated their purpose. Wide newspaper coverage of Kennedy's dealing with civil rights issues made him in their eyes a true leader for racial equality. Kennedy used, much to their pride, what they consider to be the Brazilian method of settling disputes, that of talking things out until there is no longer any need for a fight. In addition he, as most of them, was young and a Catholic. He did things. He made things move under an honest administration.

The students would very much like to adhere to a Brazilian leader with these qualities but everyone they know or support they find wanting. They want eagerly to get things done, to reform their country overnight. This is impossible because of involved social conditions, the contentions of various groups with each other and a general lethargy. When miracles aren't performed, the students become cynical. They soon adopt an attitude, as I was told several times, "If I can't change things then I might just as well get in and get mine!" They see people all around them doing it.

If they weren't such idealists they perhaps wouldn't go so far to the other extreme. But if a Brazilian leader comes along who looks like a Jack Kennedy, watch out!

Sincerely yours,


James C. Brewer