

Opening Brazil to Democracy?

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Since 1964, Brazil's "modernizing-authoritarian" military regime has been characterized by repression, torture, censorship, martial law, high economic growth, high inflation, and extreme maldistribution of income. But for the last four of those years, Brazil has been in a state of *abertura* ("opening"), a word that many observers have taken to mean "democratization." Indeed, Brazil's President João Baptista Figueiredo proclaimed in 1979 that he was going to make the country into a democracy. The unintentional irony of that statement has gotten lost: one man cannot a democracy make, especially when he is the unelected head of a military regime.

Nevertheless, most people who have written about Figueiredo since he took office have credited him with sincerity.¹ Especially since his heart attack last year, Figueiredo has been sure of a sympathetic press. (Like Ronald Reagan, he has a good personal reputation, no matter what he does.) And Figueiredo is, after all, only one man in an oligarchy run by many men, most of whom stay out of sight as much as possible. In Brazil, as in the United States, people tend to personalize

¹ See, for example, Warren Hoge, *New York Times Magazine*, December 6, 1981.

politics, talking of politicians instead of interests, factions, or forces. The politicians who are most visible become symbols of certain values or views. In Brazilian newspapers, columnists endlessly speculate about the leading actors in the political drama. When X pays a visit to Y's country home, they wonder about the meaning of the encounter for days. Few people know what goes on behind the scenes in a country where access to information is the privilege of a few. From time to time, however, events escape the control of the powers that be and rush into public view—or rather, into the view of the estimated 3 percent of the Brazilian population that reads newspapers and magazines.

Two events in the past year indicate that *abertura* may be moribund if not already dead, a mere slogan rather than a motivating force in Brazil. The first happened in Rio on May Day 1981, when an explosion in the car of an army captain wounded him and killed the sergeant who sat next to him, carrying a bomb in his lap. It seemed obvious from expert testimony that the bomb had exploded prematurely and that the two men had intended to plant it at a May Day rally sponsored by the left-wing Brazilian Democratic Center and attended by 20,000 people. Although a whitewash blaming left-wing terrorists, the official inquiry had important ramifications for the military oligarchy. One faction, supported by a high-ranking cabinet member, General Golbery, wanted the affair resolved. But the army succeeded in covering it up and Golbery, the regime's leading theoretician and strategist since 1964, resigned. Ironically, his defeat signalled the vitiating of *abertura* as an official policy. When the army stood accused of terrorism, its leaders could not abandon their institutional loyalty to attack it, even though its actions were illegal. *Abertura* had to suffer.

The other incident was deliberate rather than accidental: an attempt to "reform" the electoral laws to insure that the military government's party will win the 1982 elections. The "November [1981] package" outlawed coalitions among parties and required that each party run a complete slate of candidates in each district or not participate there at all. Since some of the new parties (created in 1980) have limited strength and organization in many areas, this change virtually guaranteed that they could not win. Meanwhile, earlier talk of the government's running a civilian presidential candidate has died away, and Figueiredo's heir apparent is another general, the head of the national intelligence service. Clearly the military intends to keep power indefinitely. So much for making the country a democracy.

But if *abertura* is not democratization, what is it? Since 1979, exiles have returned home, censorship has eased, disappearances have stopped, new political parties have formed; meanwhile a national security law has replaced the draconian Institutional Act No. 5, labor leaders have gone to jail for organizing

strikes, and a new immigration law has made it easier to deport foreigners (especially priests) or deny them permanent visas. On one hand repression has lessened; on the other it has (to use a currently trendy word in Brazil) "recrudesced." There is no straight road in Brazilian politics, only a series of Machiavellian detours.

To understand the twists and turns, it should be kept in mind that politics in Brazil has always been, and continues to be, the occupation of elites. Even under the so-called populist regimes of Kubitschek, Quadros, and Goulart, small privileged groups controlled national and local decision-making. Populism was a method of manipulating the people, not of giving them access to power. The elites formed uneasy coalitions that gathered, broke down, and reformed around various issues—nationalization of resources and industries, labor organization, distribution of wealth, land reform, birth control, divorce, etc. When the military took over, it temporarily co-opted these elites. Industrialists, bankers, businessmen, landowners, labor leaders (government appointed and controlled), clergy, technocrats, and managers had all felt seriously threatened by Goulart's crude, inflammatory attempts at reform and the real social and economic changes that encouraged peasants to organize.

This broad and fragile coalition of elites and military disintegrated within four years, and a period of violent unrest followed. So did disappearances, torture, murder, censorship, and modified martial law. By the mid-1970s the government had destroyed its opposition, losing whatever legitimacy it had in the process. The elites, who were the only political actors, had supplied much of that opposition. Their sons and daughters were among the martyrs of repression. In this context, some kind of *distensão* ("decompression") became necessary for the military to preserve its support. By 1978 *abertura* was the new catchword. The government delivered a series of reforms intended to please the elites without threatening its own hold on power. Now those rich enough to pay five dollars (almost two days' minimum wage) for a theater ticket can hear jokes about the government. Those rich enough to flee to Paris and Stockholm have returned to Brazil. Many of those rich enough to participate in politics do not seem to care for the burdens of governing; especially in big cities, a highly visible class of conspicuous consumers attends only to getting and spending.

Two elements do not fit into this pattern: the labor movement and the church, both allied to some degree against the government. A new generation of labor leaders has tried to establish unions independent of government control in effect since the 1930s. True collective bargaining does not exist, so the unions have used the strike as their main weapon—but most strikes are illegal. Recently eleven top labor leaders were sentenced to jail terms from four months to three-and-a-half years for organizing strikes against the multinational companies that export the most cars and pay their workers the lowest wages on the continent. Company ex-

ecutives admit that it is only a matter of time before collective bargaining becomes institutionalized; but for the government, repressing labor activity is a means of keeping labor from gaining additional power and of preserving elite privilege. Thus the labor leaders were prosecuted in a military court under the National Security Law, since they threaten the maintenance of the entire political system.

The Catholic Church's advocacy of land reform, redistribution of wealth, and grassroots organizing by *comunidades de base* (lay religious groups) is also subversive, since it bypasses the elites that control political activity. These small groups start with Bible study but go on to work as local lobbyists, pressuring the authorities for better housing, health, and education. Some have staged land invasions in recent months. There are already thousands of *comunidades de base* in Brazil, but they are so new that nobody knows how they will affect the political order. The government has not moved against them yet, though it is waging a propaganda war against the priests and bishops who criticize it. Right now the church is the government's most powerful opposition besides the restless elites, but its interests do not seem to coalesce with theirs. Like the army it has the advantage of a single, highly organized structure.

During the past three years, the government has cracked down on labor and clergy again and again, despite *abertura*. Now jail terms and deportation of foreign priests have replaced systematic torture and abductions, and these changes must be considered improvements. Given the government's chronic insecurity and its determination to keep control, however, there is no reason to doubt that repression could recrudescence. As Penny Lernoux observed:

Every time there is a slight opening toward basic freedoms, such as lifting of press censorship, popular reaction is so overwhelming that the military feels compelled to jam the cork back in the bottle. And because the cork could blow again at any moment, these military governments exist in permanent instability, contrary to the claims of their supporters in the international business community. Instability shapes their laws, which are better suited to the day-to-day orders of an army at war . . . than to enduring social structures identified with genuine democracies.²

Even the multinationals seem to recognize this, since a recent article in a business magazine predicted that Brazil would become a poor investment risk in the next few years, due to worsening economic and social conditions.

² Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 320.

Abertura, then, was not a new development but a passing phase in an old game. As the independent unions and the ecclesiastical communities gain strength, they will pose new threats to the military regime and to the elites. These movements are based in the newly sophisticated urban population rather than in elite factions or desperate, downtrodden peasantry. Their demands for redistribution of wealth are bound to increase, and the unions and church will support them. This is a quick recipe for conflict, even without adding the external economic problems that always affect Brazil—one of the world's biggest exporters, the world's biggest debtor, and the world's eighth-largest industrial nation.

Watching Brazil is a little like reading about the labor struggles of the nineteenth century—with some ominous differences: populations are bigger, methods of repression more powerful, the world economy more complex, the big-power game more dangerous, the local traditions different. Brazil is too big, too rich in resources, too potentially powerful, to dismiss as an overgrown banana republic. What happens there is instructive for the rest of the world, rich and poor, and should not be ignored.

Yet it is risky to characterize Brazil as a "typical" Third World country (if, indeed, there is such a thing). Unlike Mexico, Brazil is both far from God and far from the United States. This psychological and physical distance makes it hard to discern the direct connections between the two countries. But Brazil exports not only coffee, oranges, and soy beans but auto parts, shoes, and other manufactured goods to the United States and other countries. Some U.S. industries (iron ore, for instance) have relocated to Brazil to take advantage of a cheap, unprotected labor force. External economic pressures from governments and commodities markets constrain political activity and policy making, but not always in the crude ways that affect countries like El Salvador or the Dominican Republic. Brazil is too far away from the First World and too well-armed for gunboat diplomacy to work very well there. Nevertheless, European and North American multinational corporations with Brazilian branches can exert considerable leverage; the Brazilian government's strike-breaking tactics help Volkswagen and Fiat as well as Ford and General Motors.

In order to insure continuity of leadership and planning, Brazil's military rulers have self-consciously tried to "Mexicanize" the political system, perpetuating one-party rule under the aegis of a fictitious "revolution." The "November package" was one step among many in this direction. But Brazil is not Mexico: calling the coup of 1964 a revolution has not made it one, nor has it given the military the legitimacy it seeks as a governing power.

Meanwhile, the grassroots movements—*comunidades de base* and rank-and-file labor—have begun to challenge the hegemony of the centralized military state. Repression serves as a desperate response to such threats and may be a sign of weakness rather than strength. In Brazil the central government has tra-

ditionally been strong in the cities but weak in the countryside, where most of the people have lived until recent years. Selective repression has worked only as long (and as far) as the centralized power could use it to terrorize the opposition into silence. With all the resources of organized violence at its command, the Brazilian government could not permanently wipe out the church or organized labor. Both groups have set up alternative networks of information and organization that may negate the government's claim to absolute power. These opposition groups may not "win," but they survive.

It is simplistic to draw direct parallels between Brazil and Poland, El Salvador, or any other country, but the echoes are unmistakable. In the face of state tyranny and violence, democratization must be fought for; but even poor countries are so well armed that counterviolence may not be the most effective means of popular resistance. And revolutionary violence has the unhappy tendency to become state violence in its turn. Perhaps Brazil's grassroots movements can provide a light, however evanescent, on the dark and perilous road to democratization.