

Power against the People*

by Michel de Certeau, S.J.

The impossible is becoming a reality in Brazil, the unthinkable has become a fact. Methodical violence, unjustifiable repression, systematic use of denunciation and torture are emerging in a country where they were least likely to do so. Nothing is so opposed to Brazilian culture. Yesterday, speech was still circulating freely in the streets as the light and blood of communication. Today, blood is flowing in police cellars where so many men and women have fallen without knowing why: torture and corpses impose fear and silence everywhere, and dumb and terrifying rumours. Tongues fall silent, censorship and suspicion are rife.

Yesterday, the intelligence, subtlety and the manifold resources of human relationships were enough to solve or cope with all problems. Today, relationships are shattered by the suppression of all discussion; violence breaks age-old links, the brutality of a military order tends to multiply withdrawals, retirements and breaks, except between those who profit from the régime. The liberal tradition which inaugurated the first Brazilian Constitution in 1824 is thrown out as so much refuse.

This brutality takes the Brazilians by surprise, in the way in which horror suddenly strikes out of a morning sky which seemed to be dawning like any other. 'Que cosa!' Brutality strikes them before they have time to realize that it was possible. And the military may be maiming for a very long time a sort of national Brazilian genius in the way in which they are maiming so many victims of torture.

Every friend of Brazil is also affected. How can he fail to listen to the appeals which he hears, appeals that have escaped from murmurings in prison or through the bars of censorship: 'It is of the utmost importance that you should make what is happening here known'? To speak, today, is to take over from those who have been compelled to fall silent; it is to lend them a voice; it is to defend the Brazilian people; it is to begin to do something—because we cannot restrict ourselves to a meeting which evaporates on the morrow.

*Translation of a summary of the discourse given by Père Michel de Certeau, S.J., on the occasion of a meeting held at the Mutualité, Paris, on 15th January, 1970. The meeting was under the chairmanship of Professor Georges Casalis, Professor of the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Paris, and included Père Blanquart, O.P., Jean-Paul Sartre and Dr Miguel Arraes (ex governor of the state of Pernambuco, arrested by the Army in 1964, imprisoned 1964-65, and now living in exile in Algiers) amongst its other speakers. It was a meeting of solidarity with the people of Brazil in revolt, and is here published by kind permission of the author and of the *Front Brésilien d'Information*, through the good offices of Brian Darling, Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Surrey and associate of *Esprit*, who is responsible for the British Section of the Europe-Latin-America Committee.

To speak is also to give back some meaning to words that are constantly threatened by meaninglessness and that commit us to ceaseless vigilance and solidarity. If we do not protest tonight, what will justice still mean, manipulated as it is by so much injustice? If we do not once again resist the savagery that is rising from the deeps yet once more, what will the rights or liberty of man mean?

I am only too well aware that Brazil is not the only country to be threatened. There are other groups of people who are obsessed. In this very hall, there are no doubt tortured Basques who have escaped from their Spanish prisons and could tell us what is happening there.

In Brazil, what is in question is a system. Torture is not an exception, a momentary aberration. It is the logical outcome of a régime, it is its consequence and blood-mark. We have seen this sinister sign too often—in Germany, in Algeria, and elsewhere—not to be able to recognize it. We cannot, either by silence or by lassitude, be accomplices of the fascism which it denotes and which is ceaselessly re-born.

This is the régime some of the characteristics of which I should like to point out to you. What does military power consist of in Brazil?

1. *The silence of the people: the military in power*

What strikes one first, whether from near or from far, is the successive rumours of military *coups d'état* and of terrorist activity. *Coups d'état* and military action: the 5th Institutional act of 13th December, 1968, which short-circuited the democratic and parliamentary structures of the country; the Security decree of 27th September, 1969, which inaugurated and legalized police control; the designation on 30th October, 1969, by the military of General Garrastazu Médici as President of the United States of Brazil, and the simultaneous replacement of the vice-president, traditionally a civilian, by a soldier. . . . Terrorist activity: the kidnapping of the ambassador of the United States in an atmosphere of ironic popular jubilation on 2nd September, 1969. . . . Repression of terrorism: the assassination in São Paulo, on 4th November, 1969, of Carlos Marighela, erstwhile Communist M.P., one of the leaders of the opposition. . . .

But these rumours arise against a general background of muteness in the country as a whole. They rip the silence of the Brazilian people—a terrible and obsessive silence, which has its reasons.

For, in fact, M.P.s are scattered, deprived of their political rights; the parties are strangled and counted as subversive; professors and students are thrown out of their university on mere denunciation; journalists are sent away or exiled; militant workers or university people, Marxist or Christian, are imprisoned and tortured by the Department of Political and Social Order, D.O.P.S. (a political police with a fearful reputation) or by parallel organizations which are tolerated, if not encouraged—like the 'Death Squad' or the 'Anti-

Communist Commando'. The documentary evidence begins to flow in. Voices are silenced, papers are censored. Order reigns, but what sort of order? Fourteen thousand people are in detention, and the mass of the people is silent.

There is, of course, a certain economic progress (but in whose interest? We shall see). Foreign investments flow in, mostly American and German, too, because this 'order' inspires confidence. Foreign trade improves: there is a rise of 15 per cent in the first half of 1969 compared with the first half of 1968. At the end of August, 1969, the balance of payments showed a surplus of 14 million dollars. . . . It is useless to set out the figures. These are also a fact. But who profits from them? Who is paying the bill? There is the problem.

The reply is to be found in the organization of the military régime. This organization is deliberate and methodical, because these soldiers are not like the old ones. They are less divided than they were said to be after the 1964 coup; more than a thousand officers have been dismissed—and the opposition of the young, rather tougher, officers, represented by General Albuquerque Lima, remains restricted. They have a programme, and methods which it would be foolish to underestimate. They are the technocrats of a police régime. The Rockefeller Report itself notes the fact, making use of many a euphemism and distinction in regard to Latin America.

A whole system is being set up. This is hardly astonishing when one knows the prodigious technical and financial means at the disposal of the War Department, the intense work which goes on there, the work put in and the facilities granted to enable men who are politically 'safe'—mostly soldiers—to gain a scientific education.¹

2. *Fascist techniques of manning the state apparatus*

There are purely repressive measures. Thus, the work of 'conscientization' of Paulo Freire (in a country where 70 per cent of the adult population is illiterate) was stopped. In the universities, 'subversive' students or professors are systematically excluded. Everyone has been put under the obligation to denounce any action or word that is contrary to 'national security'.² University departments deemed to be 'dangerous' (political science, social science, philosophy) have their financial resources cut down.³ Student reviews and meetings have been stopped. Simultaneously, however,

¹Expenditure on the military budget for Brazil amounted to 18 per cent of the total budget in 1964, 24 per cent in 1965, and 25 per cent in 1968.

²Such denunciations, stimulated as they are by the presence of the police (agents of D.O.P.S.—anonymous as they are, they are discovered. But what is one to do? Keep quiet?) and by the fear of being accused of not having made denunciations, are, of course, followed through. The minimum penalty is five years exclusion from the university for professors, three years for students.

³The measures taken are often very discreet: paring down of the budget, cutting down the number of secretaries, etc. And as regards the professors excluded in this way, they are often amongst the best, like Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Sao Paulo), who belongs to the same group as Octavio Ianni, and whose researches into cultural dependence are decisive.

a programme of remanning is being undertaken. In this way the 'Ten-Year Plan of the I.P.E.A.', which issued from the Project elaborated by Professor Rudolf Atcon (U.S.A.), has been taken up again. This plan envisages a selection of students in function of the labour market, in liaison with the large-scale enterprises where they will have to exercise their directive functions and with a view to their due integration into the structures of the régime. Further, the fascination which the regions of the Centre or of the North (the unknown and interior voice of Brazil) exercise on students is exploited and mobilized by means of the Rondon Project (1968)¹: during the course of a whole year they are prepared for expeditions lasting from two to four months during the vacations, with the object of drawing up reports on their return on the peasants, the mines, the foci of opposition, etc.—information that is very useful to the government. . . .

These few examples go back to a policy elaborated three years ago, according to which 'education' is a 'factor in national security'. Article 1 of the programme is to train cadres. Already in July, 1966, it was being said in the name of the War Department: 'The psycho-social instrument of national strategy includes the combination of such instruments as education, information services, propaganda, for the training of personalities able to defend democracy against the social expansion of communism.'

This 'economy of education' is at the same time a militarization of education. It includes:

The setting up of the *guarda mirim* (groups of teen-age police agents);

The implantation of C.O.P.T.O., centres (*Obras Públicas e Treinamento Ocupacional*), especially in the Nordeste and the sugar growing regions, which bring together thousands of young people between the ages of 16 to 21 (a total of how many: 6,000? 7,000?) under the direction of soldiers and with the aid of the Peace Corps and members of North-American associations (United States Agency for International Development: U.S.A.I.D.)—to give them physical training and education in 'civil action': Nazi groups rear their head again;

The multiplication of strictly disciplined sport-liturgies, the first national manifestation of which, on the occasion of the anniversary of independence, was the *Semanade Patria* (1st–7th September), accompanied by slogans, mottoes and 'celebrations' such as had not been seen since the good days of the *Estado Novo* of Vargas (1937–1945). The same concern with cadres is to be seen in the sort of thing which the government attacks or creates.

¹And this is why preference is given, for example, to privately-financed studies and private universities, which favour 'the heirs and elements of order'. 'The most important thing', the Atcon Plan was already saying (meaning by this to stop the university becoming a focus of agitation) 'is to reduce the number of students, more competent and better selected.'

Faced with a generation of young people methodically educated and put in their place in this way, what worth will protests emerging from dismantled forces, from old liberal campaigners, from unhappy consciences, from 'prophetic' vocations be? The military technicians already despise all such people, like so many objects in a museum of a bygone age, alienated from the present exigencies of the economy or national security; they allow them or deprive them of a public stage according to the needs of public opinion, and soon they may be able to tolerate them without danger, and with the added advantage of supplying verbal issues and a 'democratic' front to the military apparatus, in a country well under control.

3. *National Security all powerful*

But what is the political philosophy behind this co-ordinated programme? It is accessible in its outline, because there are official presentations of it: the collection of articles published in the *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Politicos* (21st July, 1968), the collection of lectures given by general Golbéry do Couto e Silva (*Geopolitica do Brasil*), the constitutional statutes (the Federal Constitution of 1967, the Decrees Nos. 200, 25th February 1967; 314, 13th March 1967; 348, 8th January 1968)—without mentioning the Reserved Documents which filter out from the War Department or the criticisms of courageous M.P.s like Edgard Mata Machado, in Parliament (1st February, and 19th April, 1968) when there still was one.

This philosophy is strangely meagre. It places National Security above the four sectors which it distinguishes in the nation: the psychosocial (press, education, Church), politics (where Congress is put), the military and the economic: a 'Council of National Security' is the court of final appeal, it decides, purges or supports. It is shadowed by the National Service of Information, in a parallel and dominating position.

But to conduct what policy? Nothing very precise is said; not only because there are sharp differences between more economically-minded and more nationalist-minded soldiers, but above all because all effort is directed towards creating the conditions for order (problems of national organization and of the struggle against Communism). In the process, any question of the choice of society, of any social or political project, is forgotten: Security, security. The military make a tool of economics and of psychosociology. They think of the Church in military terms: hierarchy and a means of order. Their thought-patterns are military, starting from the initial position of the army, a special body within the country and in the normal way at the service of a policy decided outside itself. They make a law out of the instruments of policy, without realizing that such instruments presuppose, like the army itself, certain postulates or objectives which none of them determine. They exploit

certain techniques of order and policing, but without any true plan.

It is an 'order' without policy. It is a tactic without a strategy—an instrument up for sale, or, rather, an organization destined to become the victim of its own unthought-out presuppositions and of its own logic.

4. *The cancer of violence that has been let loose*

That is where the gravest danger perhaps lies. A coherent and expansionist force (expansionist in terms of budgetary resources allocated to it and in terms of its implantation in the country), made up of 200,000 soldiers (although the figure is disputed, being 180,000 according to some and as much as 300,000 according to others), is growing. There are also federal police forces under the control of the minister of war and many parallel organizations.

These men are of humble origins. (Working men and peasants enrol. During the demonstrations in Rio, the students reminded the police of forgotten solidarity: 'You are poor men', 'Your mother is hungry'.) They find that rarest of things, financial security and social promotion. What is more, not spared by the Brazilian sense of humour since 1945 and unappreciated as they are, they find that they have, as a body, been allotted the role of defenders of the motherland. The honour of being saviours reinforces the advantage of being beneficiaries. This combination gives them a double motivation, which the instructors of the recruits know how to exploit. Today, you declare yourself a member of D.O.P.S. You are proud of it.

As a result, they think that everything is allowed in the name of their power and of their 'glorious' task. These heroes, with new social status, become more and more difficult to control (seizures and interventions which the authorities cannot master show this already); in this way torture is a cancer which grows by itself. The body which has been so well set up follows the law of its own growth. Naturally, criteria of more political action inspired by regard for the people are wanting. The military machine has its own momentum, it escapes its makers, it 'betrays' them; in revealing what they still lack the military, too, take to torture.

5. *Alliance between power and money*

The military say and think: 'We are at war', 'We are saving the country'. They give priority to the conditions of struggle against 'Communism', and efface political objectives. For reasons of order and economic progress they favour a cultural malthusianism (selecting men and ideas) as well as a social one (ensuring the prosperity of well-organized networks, on condition of keeping three-quarters of the population in order and apart, that is to say, the

'bad producers' and the 'bad consumers'.¹ 'Only an alliance between military power and the great captains of industry can get the country out of the impasse in which it has got stuck', wrote a group of higher Brazilian officers in 1969. This alliance is sealed thanks to the silence of the people and the blood of those who are tortured.

This alliance is also the beneficiary and the accomplice of North-American intervention. Soldiers, counsellors, troops come from the United States, bringing with them, out of their stinging experience in Vietnam, techniques destined to eliminate nationalist and socialist groups before they grow and make the masses aware. It is a preventive war. It pursues any reticence; arrests on the slightest suspicion, justified or not; it makes any suspect (and who is not?) a man whom one can torture without risk, under the guise of getting information about avant-garde organizations and dismantling them. Man-hunts are on the increase. Will they have any limit short of the weariness of the torturers? That is impossible. For, at the moment when the régime thinks it can do anything against the movements of popular resistance and so is aiming to strangle an entire people by terror, the alliances and the consequences of a system are conspiring to unite the Brazilian people in the struggle for its liberation.

¹Has it not been said in high places that Brazil could increase its economic prosperity with 20 million inhabitants, and that there were 60 million too many—a remnant one did not know what to do with? . . . For their part, the bishops assembled at Medellín, in 1968, stated: '60 million Brazilians are not yet integrated into the economic circuit.'