

FORUM

THE FELLOW-TRAVELERS

Jorge Ibargüengoitia

[The following is an excerpt from a personal commentary on the Symposium of the Intellectuals which took place in Mexico and on a publishing venture which took place in Cuba. Due to a lack of space we are reproducing only the part concerned with the symposium.]

The inaugural banquet was a disaster. The Assistant Secretary in charge of the welcome, gave a speech which evidently had been prepared for another occasion. The Angel Salon looked frightful, the steak was overdone, a waiter got annoyed because I took an extra highball, fifty-four intellectuals who had been invited to the banquet, but not to the symposium, were offended upon discovering that many were called and few chosen, and they accused us of having sold ourselves to Yankee imperialism. Afterwards, fortunately, there was a party in a private home, where we got drunk and danced in the dark, because someone turned off the lights.

The next day everyone was hung-over. When we boarded the plane which was to take us to Merida, we had pasty mouths, bad breath, bloodshot eyes with enormous bags under them. There were forty of us: thirty-six men and four women. Some had distinguished themselves in their profession and were famous, others were millionaires, others unknowns; some, as later was revealed, were mentally retarded.

While the DC4 chugged along its route, each one went to sit with the person he wanted to bleed. I was chatting with Jack Thompson and got him to give me a scholarship, Pepe Donoso arranged that Knopf, who was wearing Bermuda shorts and a Tirolese hat, would publish his book, William Styron commissioned Juan García Ponce to translate his novel.

A guy with a tuft for a beard, who said he was a photographer for *Life*, wandered from one side of the aisle to the other, taking photographs.

"Let's see, gentlemen," he said to Rulfo and me. "I'm going to take one of you leaning toward the window, looking at the scenery."

While he was going away, after taking the picture, Rulfo said to me: "That one's a spy for the CIA. I've watched him take fifty-four shots without changing the roll."

We arrived in Merida dying of hunger, awaiting the feast of pheasant, wild boar and deer which had been programmed. In vain. They informed us that there had been a death in the family of the presumed host, and that because of the mourning the banquet had been cancelled. They herded us into some

buses with blue windows and sent us directly to Chichén, which is three hours away.

In the Hotel Mayaland we ate meat from some unidentified animal and a broth which someone said was bitter orange soup. Afterward, in the funeral grand hall, we had the first plenary session. The introductions were made, which consisted of a reading of the names and attributes of each one of the participants. The person mentioned rose from his seat and the rest applauded when the introduced was an unknown, and whistled, when he was known. At the end, Joseph Cotton, the organizer, announced that the Foundation would pay for the drinks. This time we all applauded with feeling.

The panel on urban planning on the following day was made up of five architects, an educator, a sociologist and a writer. The educator explained to us that present-day Latin America has the same number of people as the United States; that within forty years it would have double the population of the United States; that in the North American cities the poor live in the center and the rich on the periphery, that in Latin America the rich live in the center and the poor on the periphery; that if one fine day in the city of Los Angeles, it occurs to everyone who has a car to take it out, a complete tie-up will be produced, etc. One of the North American architects who had just visited Tlaltelolco, and who didn't know that the apartments were going to cost up to forty thousand dollars, said it was marvelous that they had built a city "for the poor" such a short distance from the Paseo de la Reforma. Another of the American architects, on the other hand, said that Tlaltelolco was chaos and that the children who grew up there were going to be handicapped for their entire life. A Colombian architect, as a eulogy, said that in Mexico City there were no skyscrapers, by which he offended the Mexican delegation.

The most famous commentary, however, was that of the Chilean poet who said: "The most interesting city that I know is Tiflis".

—"Would you like to tell us why?" The Chairman politely asked him

—"Well, because it is the most interesting city that I know."

There were no arguments that day. After all, most of us did not know very much about urban planning, but the following day, it was a very different thing, because the topic was Inter-American relations. The United States was accused, not once but many times, of promoting in Latin America the enrichment of the rich and the impoverishment of the poor, the disproportioned exploitation of natural resources, the military dictatorships, the lack of civic sentiment, stupidity, illiteracy, hoof and mouth disease and Catholicism.

When the Latins finished their insults, Podhoretz got up and spoke in the name of the Americans.

"We agree," he said, "but unfortunately, neither the Secretary of the State nor the President is amongst us, and they are the persons who name the ambassadors, therefore, what do you want us to do?"

Nobody knew what to answer him. A deaf old man, who had not understood the previous discussion, made a concrete suggestion:

"We must promote friendship among the Latin Americans and the North Americans."

"Why must there be friendship?" a Latin American asked him. "After all you are rich and we are poor. Be satisfied with being rich. Why in addition do you want to have friends?"

That night we went to Merida to dine with the governor of Yucatan. "I wouldn't miss this," said Pepe Donoso, before arriving at dinner. "I can already imagine the governor's house, the glass chandeliers, the governor's giggling daughters, his wife with the moustache, the Viennese waltzes, or perhaps, the folklore orchestra, the poet laureate of Yucatan, the court soprano. . . I wouldn't miss this!"

Unfortunately, the dinner which the governor offered us was a *buffet froid* served on the terrace of a hotel, with a view of the deserted pool. The guests of the governor were ourselves, and six of his flunkies. Before dining, we lined up to be introduced and shake hands with the host.

In the closing session, it was revealed that a group of the participants considered that the Latin American intellectuals had not carried out successfully their proper role in the political life of Latin America.

There was a great commotion. Before this declaration could be finished, fifteen Latin Americans were asking for the floor. When this was in turn conceded each one spoke of the fight against oppression and named a long list of martyrs among the "intellectuals."

The Mexicans looked ridiculous because they didn't have any martyrs.* It was one of the rare occasions when no one remembered Siqueiros.

"The Mexicans have no martyrs," said Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "because Mexico is not part of Latin America".

It was never known if he said this with the desire of insulting us.

When the storm had passed, another came. Some expressed the opinion that some participants had drunk too much and had not let the rest sleep. Jack Thompson asked for the floor.

"I protest. If someone wants to drink, let him drink, if someone doesn't want to drink, let him not drink. If someone wants to sleep, let him sleep, and if someone doesn't want to sleep, then let him not sleep. And if he who wants to sleep isn't able to sleep, because he who wants to drink won't let him, very simple: let him stay awake."

Those who weren't in agreement rose and went to eat dinner, the rest of

* This was written before October 1968. [Editor's note: On October 19, the author Octavio Paz was fired as Mexican Ambassador to India for supporting student protestors against the government.]

Latin American Research Review

us applauded. Without any more items to discuss, the session ended and the Symposium of the Intellectuals was over.