

On marginality, or:
The West, as seen from Brazil.

Every matter of fact can be viewed from different standpoints. This poses a problem. Take, for example, an apple: in what sense can it be said that the points of view of Newton, a farmer, a botanist, a cook, a painter, a gourmet, the apple tree, the apple worm and the seed coincide upon the apple? We may, of course, try and put into brackets all possible points of view, in order to disclose the heart of the matter, the apple, the cidos. We shall then try to give an "objective" account of the apple. Or we may, in a moment of existential decision, elect a particular point of view and engage ourselves in it, so as to handle the apple. There will then be a "subjective" attitude, and we shall be more interested in changing the apple than in revealing its secret. But still, the problem is there: in what sense can it be said that we know the apple?

Take, for another example, western civilisation: in what sense can it be said that we know it? By phenomenological reduction? By "engagement"? By the effort to change it? By assuming an ironical distance? Of course, the matter of fact of western civilisation is viewed in a slightly different way than the matter of fact of an apple. It depends on where we find ourselves, and if we find ourselves as at all, because western civilisation is a matter of fact of the type called "situation". If we find ourselves, we may find that we are in it and that we are it. In a curious sort of way we may say that in the case of western civilisation the terms "objective" and "subjective" are even more dubious than in the case of the apple. We may find out that finding ourselves means finding western civilisation, and that the knowledge of western civilisation is a sort of selfknowledge. This may not always be so. If we find ourselves in a situation called, say, "the Madman Islands", the knowledge of western civilisation will be structurally more similar to the knowledge of an apple, than if we find ourselves in situations like London or São Paulo. In London and São Paulo the effort to know the West will be a kind of Socratic effort. But, I suggest, the effort to know the West has a different climate even in situations as similar as London and São Paulo. This is true, because São Paulo is more marginal to the West than London, and if we find ourselves in São Paulo, we find the West in a different aspect. This aspect, if communicated, may enrich the knowledge of the West of those who find themselves in London. In this sense it may even be of help to those who try to find themselves in London. This is the purpose of this article. It is being written in São Paulo. And the writer feels that this possibly significant standpoint is practically unknown in London. The November 1965 issue of Encounter seems to prove it. It is an issue of dialogue.

Saying that São Paulo is marginal to the West, I am assuming that the West is a structure. If that be so, and if it be at all significant to talk of a structure of the West, then São Paulo will offer an excentric viewpoint. But to say that the West is a structure is, of course, highly hypothetical, and is thus a challenge. Those who find themselves in São Paulo might not feel that it is in any way excentric. I say this for the following reason: if the reader would find excentricities in what will follow, this may be due to his attitude. I can even imagine that some who are in São Paulo might feel that though the West is a structure, its center is shifting. The term "ex-

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centric" will then be, for them, a very relative term. Nonetheless, I shall assume, for the sake of argument, that we Brazilians find ourselves on the margin of western civilization. In some sense this is a significant statement. If we view western civilization not as an existential circumstance, but as an historical process, then it can be said with some reason that the process has reached more advanced stages of realization in some places, and these will be called its centers. Brazil may be called, in this sense, in some way underdeveloped. Again, if we view western civilization as an open system, then it can be said that it is more infiltrated by external influences in some places, and these will be called its margins. The African and Far eastern influences at work in Brazil may place this country on the margin in this sense. Now both historical and existential thought emphasize the importance of marginal experience, of "situations of limit". It is a situation of challenge which provokes creative reaction. I suggest that it is significant to consider Brazil in this spirit, and I shall do so in what follows.

Let me first give you an overall picture. Brazil is approximately half of South America both in extension and population. But its economic and cultural links with the rest of South America are tenuous. Our relations with Europe and the United States are much more intense than with South American countries. This is due to geographical reasons, (we are open to the ocean and closed to the continent), and to historical reasons, (we do not partake of the Spanish, but of the Portuguese tradition). It is therefore utterly misleading to try and insert Brazil in an "Latin American" context. In fact, the country should be viewed as a society "sui generis", engaged in the construction of a civilization in tropical surroundings. I believe that this is an important point to start from. If we assume a different point, we might miss the fact that here in Brazil something is going on which is at least as important as a symptom for the future of western civilization as what is going on say in the Soviet Union or the United States. The tropical climate has been, for the last two thousand five hundred years, an obstacle to the development of advanced civilization. This is no longer so, and becomes less so, as technology advances. But of course, a tropical modern civilization, if and when realized, will differ in some aspects from a civilization of temperate climates. What goes on in Brazil is a painful, but rapid, mutation of western civilization. The very roots of that civilization must be re-examined, and its fundamental concepts and values must be re-formulated, if it is to result in a new, meaningful and dignified way of life. This is, I believe, what Brazilians are doing, though most of them might not know it.

If seen superficially, say from an economic point of view, the country offers a scene widely different from what I just said, and this is the reason why so few people notice what is happening below the surface. Such an observer will see the misery, the ignorance, and the social injustice which brand our society as one of so many underdeveloped countries. But I suggest that this is not a very profound aspect. Much more interesting are, I believe, those tendencies which press to the surface in order to change it. Let me first tell you where they come from, and then, where they apparently lead to.

The Portuguese tradition, from which this country stems, is a relatively weak support, (compared to, say the English tradition in North America), and tends

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to be diluted. Very early the African element made its decisive appearance, ever since the second half of the nineteenth century Italian, German and Polish immigration began to change the structure of proto-Brazilian thought, and Jewish, Arab, Japanese, and lately Chinese immigration prevented a crystallization. The cultural weakness of Portugal favoured French, English, German and American impulses to disturb the formation of a Brazilian culture. It can therefore be said that Brazil was a melting pot in a sense much more radical than the United States, since there was no structure to support the process of assimilation. No racial, religious or national barriers to speak of could be erected in such a situation. There was an amorphous society in search for personality, and the search was very difficult, because the values conflicted. This is the reason why Brazil did not offer any tangible image, until very recently, for an external observer. And even for a Brazilian it was very difficult to find himself in a situation that consisted of mutual alienations. Most of the articulations of the past are therefore marked by the stamp of inauthenticity and a somewhat precise alienation, of which French positivism is an example. But now a personality is emerging.

It emerges in various forms. Let me take the plastic arts as a first example. Ever since the Renaissance western plastic arts divorced themselves from everyday crafts and from the rites of a religious cult which had, up to then, dominated the culture. The result of this divorce is the ugliness that marks nineteenth century industrial products, the profanization of life, and art for art's sake. Modern art can be seen as an attempt to bridge the gulf between exhibited works of art and everyday life, and to irradiate into the situation of western man this elusive quality called "beauty" which is a trait of every human product, but which somehow went lost with the progress of science. A measure of success of this attempt is the fact that a new style is emerging in western civilization, perhaps the first true style after the Gothic. New African and Japanese art did not suffer the same distortion. In Negro art painting and sculpture has always preserved its intimate relation with magic, even when transported to Brazil and transferred into slave art. And Japanese painting and calligraphy continued to be an instrument of mystic meditation, even if practised in its new Brazilian setting. The problem of western art at the present moment is how to become existentially meaningful and how to give significance to a life cluttered with tedious instruments and gadgets. In Brazil, this problem poses itself in a slightly different manner. Can western art capture the magic of Negro art, as we see it around us daily, and can it capture the mystic significance of Japanese paintings which are always present in our surroundings, and can it still be significant in a society so marked by western technology as ours? The answer to this question is the new Brazilian painting and sculpture, in which Negro and Japanese notes predominate, but which is firmly inserted in western tradition.

Let me quote architecture as a second example. The hideous ugliness of European and North American buildings of the nineteenth century was the result of a victorian prudeness trying to hide the materials of construction. The new materials now available and the new attitude toward form are revolutionizing the aspect of towns and houses. But still, in Europe and in the States, the narrowness of available space, the greyness of the climate, and the rigour of winter put a severe limit to possible experimentation. Here in Brazil we still have nature to con-

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quer, and tropical nature at that, and we can put modern architecture at test how it will master this task with beauty. And we can rely more heavily on Japanese experience, not only because we have our Japanese, but also because conditions are more similar. We have open spaces, we have tropical colours, and we have the challenge of much less tradition. We can be more daring, and in fact we must be more daring, since our tasks are so much more demanding. The result can be seen in the remodelling of the city of Rio de Janeiro, in the skyline of São Paulo, and in the new capital of Brasilia, to quote a few examples.

Let me mention music very shortly. In a sense it can be said that music is typically western. Elsewhere it is the expression of a festive mood in a profane or sacred sense of the term. It is a vehicle of song, or dance, or prayer. But in the West it has become abstract, and it is the immediate articulation of the mind, just like mathematics. This is why Schopenhauer believes music to be an immediate access to the will before it is fractured by the principle of individuation. Music can therefore be said to be, together with mathematics, the most important contribution of western civilisation to the treasury of mankind. But music has bought this abstractness at the expense of that concrete emotion which we witness every night at listening to the drums on the hills around our cities. Can an intellectual man assimilate this vital rhythm and avoid the cheap jazziness of American music? Can music become a language which is at the same time abstract from representation, and concrete in its impact? The Bachian suits of Villalobos are one possible answer, the apparently popular, but in reality profoundly intellectual efforts of some of our poets and composers, known in Europe by the term "bossa nova", are another.

Poetry is another case to be mentioned. It is obvious to us, who are exposed to so many languages of so different structures, that poetry is in essence the attempt to create new forms of language, in order to utter something which has never before been uttered. The poet is, as Heidegger says, the advanced poet of conversation, who faces the abyss of the unspoken in order to conquer it for language. But we can feel how woefully inadequate is the structure of European languages to its tasks at the present moment. It is even unable to express the sentences of theoretical science, and the reality of the world which science discloses cannot therefore be captured. This is partly responsible for the climate of the absurd that now prevails in western civilisation. The linear, discursive structure of European languages, its "subject-predicate" form, is aristotelian and completely inadequate for expressions of modern logic and mathematics. But there are other forms of languages, and they can be adapted to ours. Consider the Chinese characters and its two-dimensional meaning. Consider languages like the Indian Tupi-Guarani which elevate words into new levels of meaning by sticking them together. Consider languages like the Chinese, which combine syllables like mosaics in order to achieve meaning. Is not this a challenge. Should not the Portuguese language be remodelled to take advantage of these suggestions? Could not, by such creation of new forms and words our world become concrete again, because thinkable again and is not this the true task of the poet? This is what the concrete poets in Brazil are doing.

May I mention philosophy, if only in passing? It seems to us, here in Brazil, that western philosophy is hopelessly divided. If we disregard traditional systems like Hegelism and Marxism, whose impact lies in the past, there seems to be an abyss that separates Anglo-Saxon thought from the Continental. On the Anglo-

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On one side the philosophical interest seems to be centered around formal problems, mostly problems of language. There is an air of abstraction and of lack of content in all these endeavours. On the continental side, probably as a result of two lost wars, there is a fundamentally anti-intellectual stress on the absurdness of human condition, a kind of admittance of defeat, although this is masked in various forms. We are open to both these trends, and their problems are, to some extent, ours. But they merely supply us the instruments for the analysis of our own, and somewhat different, situation. We are called upon to supply the new civilisation which is being born with concepts and norms. It should be a western civilisation, because, in that civilisation are almost all of our values. But it cannot be that tired, disillusioned and exhausted civilisation as it appears in the two philosophical trends I have mentioned. We must surpass that stage, and that is in fact what we are trying to do, though maybe the results are so far somewhat meagre.

And this leads me to the consideration of the basic problem. Western civilisation is marked chiefly by technological progress. This has resulted in the progressive disappearance of nature, and its substitution by industrial parks and parks for recreation. Man ceases to be a productive existence, and tends to be a consumer and a functionnaire of a super-human apparatus. And as automation advances, man tends to be a retired functionnaire whose only function will be the consumption of goods and services, and of time of leisure. Caught in that trend, western man does not realize that all traditional categories have by now lost almost all of their meaning. All these traditional values like freedom, equality, love and duty change their meaning in a situation of super-abundance. All these traditional issues like socialism and liberalism, individualism and collectivism, tend to be empty, and in fact technological progress ignores them. Now Brazil is an underdeveloped country, in the sense that technological progress has here been spotty. There are spots as developed as the most advanced parts of the western world, but there are others not very far removed from the medieval. The so-called developed countries assume, somewhat naively, that what Brazil needs is to catch up with them, in order to be like them. But we are in the curiously privileged position to be able to see where progress will lead us to, unless we give it a different structure. All we need is to look at the developed countries. And this is our main challenge.

We feel, of course, that progress is needed, and that the situation as it is now is an undignified situation. And we feel also that technology is a necessary part of our evolution. But we feel that it has been applied in a very dubious manner in the developed countries. Some other method must be found, if human life is to be worth living. It will not do to exchange undernutrition for the tedious gluttony of the affluent societies marked by satiric disgust, by dharma burn and the terrible efficiency of computers. And we feel that we might, just might, find a different approach to the future. The traditional hatreds that are the motives of western development, all these class struggles, national competitions, race prejudices and religious frictions, are almost absent in this country. Then this is a poor society, it is nonetheless a society where envy, revenge and phantasm are lacking to an extent almost unbelievable to the outside observer. This may be due to the fact that nature is still the enemy, and men are therefore allied in their struggle against it. But it may anyhow be the basis for a new kind of community, in which western civilisation could be brought to new fruition. It

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does without saying that nothing guarantees the success of this endeavour. It may well end in an abortion. But on the other hand, it is worth trying. And it is this that gives a sense of urgency to everything which is happening now in this country.

I believe that the centers of western civilization are not sufficiently aware of what is going on at the margin. And this should not be so, because these events might have an influence on the civilization as a whole and are even now meaningful and worth knowing. I asked, at the beginning of this article, about the significance of the sentence: "we know western civilization". I suggested that this knowledge is a kind of self-knowledge. And it includes the knowledge of present-day Brazil, even though this may be an eccentric viewpoint. The very sketchy considerations contained in this article are intended to contribute to that knowledge.