

EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT IN BRAZIL

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To travel means to surpass one's condition and look at it from outside. Thus a point of view is achieved which is in some sense similar to philosophical speculation. It becomes possible to survey one's situation from an "ironical" distance, the better to return to it with a view to commit oneself to it. Now he who travels is Brazilian, and if the territory he looks from back on Brazil is Western Europe and the United States, he will, I think, be struck by the following overall fact: there is a profound division between the northern and the southern half of the globe, a division which will become ever more decisive as this century nears its end, and Brazil occupies a very peculiar place in this division. This confers on the Brazilian scene a relevance often missed from inside, and it is that theme on which I want to talk to you this evening.

Let me first consider the division I mentioned. On one part of the globe, (roughly speaking on the European peninsula and in the United States and Canada), the methods of science begin to be applied and change profoundly the human condition. In other words: nature, society, and what used to be called "the soul", begin to be manipulated in a disciplined and deliberate manner. And the results of that manipulation begin to become apparent. Nature, society and the soul have become objects, and as such are ~~subjective~~ apt to the following: (1) The processes of nature, society, and soul can be partly explained. The world becomes ever more transparent to explanation. Therefore nature, society and the soul tend to disappear from the horizon and become devoid of interest. (2) The processes of nature, society and the soul become in part predictable. Miracles are becoming very rare. And there are less and less surprises. (3) The processes of nature, society and the soul become in part manageable. The world tends to be as it should be, in consequence of this management, and it will be entirely as it should be. Being and ought to be, reality and value, tend to confuse, and there is progressively less left to desire and to aim at. This can be resumed by saying that there is progressively less room left for acting, for surprise, and for wishes. The world resembles, on that part of the globe, ever more Paradise, as it was proclaimed by the prophets.

Nonetheless the climate of Paradise does not prevail. paradisiacal tedium, and paradisiacal boredom and weariness of life do not prevail, (although there are symptoms in that direction especially among University students). That is so, because the Paradise in the making is being challenged from outside. To the South and Southeast of Eden there live societies which object to being manipulated. This is somewhat surprising. These people somehow

refuse to be objects of the scientific method. They insist on being partners, not objects. They insist on being recognized as such, and not on being understood. They insist that not cognition, but recognition be applied to them. This is a new development. Up to now they were natives, or primitives, or exotic civilizations. (that means, they were objects of knowledge). But now they are becoming people. Other human beings. Either a meaningful conversation will come about with them, or the impossibility of conversation will bring about a conflict that will characterize the latter part of this century. And this is of course a danger for the Paradise in the making. Considering this danger, we must agree that all internal problems of the technological world will become increasingly secondary. For instance, it will become increasingly devoid of interest whether Paradise is best brought about by the workers and farmers, or by the play of the free market. The north-south division will obliterate the west-east division.

The north-south division, (whether it articulates itself in conversation or conflict), will profoundly modify the structure of technological society. It will also, no doubt, modify the scientific outlook on the world. Other views on the world will penetrate it. A new state of affairs will come about, in which quite a lot will be left to surprise, to act upon and quite a lot will be left to desire. How much surprised the technological world will be, how much it will be asked to act, and how much will be left to desire, that is the problem of the immediate future. Any simple glance at a population statistic can prove this. What I am saying is not prophecy, but a simple projection of existing trends into the next ten years. And, in fact, everybody knows it. But I do not believe that everybody always realizes it.

Now, as I said, Brazil occupies, within this general frame, a very special position. First of all you have to consider an inversion of terms. Brazil is a kind of miniature of the global scene, on which the north represents the south, and vice versa. It is in the southern part of the country that technology begins to change human condition, whereas in the north the population begins to assert itself as a partner in history. But in Brazil the division is not as clear cut as in the rest of the world. There are islands in the north, (a few big cities and their immediate surroundings), where the scientific way of life is developed. And there are large territories in the south which are in this sense underdeveloped. And there is, lastly, a constant flux from the north to the south, which perturbs constantly the process. It is therefore, in one sense, true, that Brazil represents a miniature of the global division. But in another sense that division represents itself in an entirely different manner. The two sides interpenetrate to a considerable extent, and there are very many points of contact which make a true conversation possible. Now

Should the global division result in overall conflict, Brazil would find herself in a conflicting position. But should it result in conversation, Brazil could be one of the very few places on earth where it could start in a meaningful manner. It is my contention that that conversation has, in fact, already started. That that is the importance Brazil has in the present scene, and you will agree that this is a great importance. And that we should view what is happening in Brazil now within that context.

I shall now abandon my view from a distance, and try to analyze the situation in which an intellectual in São Paulo finds himself at the present moment. He is conditioned, by his immediate surroundings and by his way of life, in a very similar way to an intellectual of New York or Paris. Let me describe how he reacts to that condition, (that is if he reacts at all, if he is honest). The progressive realisation of Paradise on earth, (which is obviously going on around him), is experienced like a discount of the future. Not only the Moon, but also Saturn and Sirius, have virtually been reached, explored and transformed into sources of raw material. The chemical composition of life has been virtually discovered, and it becomes virtually possible to handle life just like dead matter. Happiness through drugs has been virtually invented, and it is possible, virtually, to provoke in oneself and in one's neighbors any behavior desired. It is becoming ever more obvious that the impulse of progress is exhausted, because the term "progress" is becoming a meaningless term. On the other hand it is a fact that progress is becoming automatic. It dispenses increasingly human action and human decision. Machines and computers are assuming, increasingly, the role of human action and decision. In a word: the Paulista intellectual finds himself in a post-historical situation where there is no future. It is the "nunc stans" of the ancients.

This existential feeling of boredom and nausea is reinforced by purely rational considerations. Theoretical science no longer supplies the intellectual with growing knowledge in any meaningful sense of the term. It is nothing but a discourse which endlessly varies the themes of a few pre-conceived models. This can be shown through an analysis of scientific propositions. On the other hand, philosophy is shown, by the same analysis, to be mostly a chain of meaningless statements. There is no possible way back to religious belief, because faith cannot be compelled nor willed deliberately. An aesthetic life, (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term), might be his only answer. But he sees through it. He becomes convinced of the absurdness of every effort. It is only through a kind of inertia that he goes on living and acting, and also because he is not always aware of his situation. In the last analysis he finds himself "vis-à-vis du rien", and it is the suicidal call of the void that attracts him. It is in this situation that existential philosophy is born.

But then he looks a little bit farther around him. On the horizon of his situation he finds a completely different picture. He finds people in continuous contact with him, after all partners of part of his conversation, for whom the world is not, like for him, a transparent, slightly nebulous, and absurd mockery of reality. But it is a set of obstinate, stupid and brutal obstacles, against which man hurls himself desperately in search of realisation. Obstinate, stupid and brutal obstacles like disease, illiteracy, hunger, lack of shelter. Whereas he finds himself within an apparatus that works ever more smoothly and ever more absurdly, these people in his neighborhood find themselves in a hostile nature. And whereas he finds himself in a post-historical situation, these people around him find themselves in a pre-historical situation, about to enter history and change their surroundings.

The plight of these people, their very real sufferings, has a double effect on his outlook. On the one hand his own sufferings, (although mortal), become somehow superficial. On the other hand he feels responsible, (through his acts but mostly through his passivity), for the sufferings of these people. This throws him into a terrible dilemma. He knows, from history, how the condition of these people can be changed, namely through application of the scientific method. But he knows, also, from history, that this change will result in his own, and rather desperate, condition. And he sees the confirmation of this in the so-called developed countries. But even if he silences within himself this objection, and even if he decides to commit himself to a change of the condition of these people on a technological pattern, (seeing that the present sufferings are intolerable), even then the problem arises how a true commitment is possible, if he lacks believe in it. In other words: how can he commit himself to technological progress, (with every social and political consequence that has), if he is convinced, existentially and speculatevely, of the absurdity of such progress? But if he denies such commitment, how is he to face his "underdevelopped" partners?

Many of our intellectuals are caught in this dilemma, and it cannot be taken seriously enough by anyone interested in the phenonmnon. Some chose commitment in a sartrian sense, but the inauthenticity of it can be felt in each and every of their action. Others chose not to commit themselves, but at the cost of their consciencé. But, fortunately, I believe this dilemma to be false, and the result of a wrong analysis of the Brazilian situation. This is how I see it:

The technological civilisation, (let me call it "western"), is not the only possible civilization. If I am convinced, (as I am), that its radical realisation results in an impersonal, inhuman, kafkean apparatus, that does not mean that human history as a whole must necessarily result in that post-historical

lead end. There are other civilisations. We in Brazil know very well of their existence, and we know intimately well the African civilisation. Very early in Brazil's history there came about a synthesis between Western and African way of life, between Western and African concepts and values. The outlook of the African on the world is not scientific. It is not the relation of subject to object, man against nature. It is a different climate of life, wherein man finds himself part of nature, and an expression of the same divine forces that breath through nature. There is therefore a different tonus in life, a festive and orgastic tonus. We can observe it in the carnival, in the beat of the drums of the Rio hills, in the rhythm of songs, in our painting and sculpture. There is no room, in that climate, for existential boredom and nausea. There is no room, in it, for a speculative desperation. Although there might be room in it for a specific lassitude and sadness. It is to this our African heritage we must look, I believe, in our attempt to overcome our existential situation. It is this existential climate which can give a festive savour to our grey lives.

But once this element, (and others), is installed organically within the Western structure, this must in turn be made to bear on the Brazilian situation in order to change it and make it dignified to live in. It is therefore not a question, for the Brazilian intellectual, to commit himself to a tired and exhausted Western pattern, in order to change the Brazilian scene; but it is a question of committing himself to a new civilisation, born out of these two elements, and then apply it. Out of the terrible division which is now a characteristic of the country, a new form of life should be welded. And this is possible to do, because the terrible division is not as clear cut as it is in other parts of the world.

Now what I am saying is not only possible, but it is already being attempted in many fields of endeavor. What I am telling you is not a purely theoretical philosophical analysis of the situation. On very many levels it has already resulted in realisations. I offer as a few examples Brazilian literature, painting, music, architecture, the theater and many more manifestations. In all of them you will see how Western and African elements are being welded, in order to find new concepts and values. Of course, you may say that these results are somewhat meagre, if compared to the pressing needs of the hour. But then a new civilisation is not born in short notice, and it may take a generation to translate it into an effective social, economic and technological way of living. I believe however, that our youth is that generation.

Let me put it this way: I do not think that the future of Brazil lies with the beatniks in rua Augusta, the elegant street of São Paulo. Nor do I believe that it lies with those who commit themselves to categories of thought and be

avior impressed on us by our western tradition. I believe that it lies with those who try to find themselves truly in their situation and formulate their own concepts. And it is this part of our youth that is building a new society, meaningful for the rest of the world.

Brazil is a country where Western and African civilisation meet, but this encounter forms the basis of other immigrant cultures that converge on it. Out of all these influences, European, Near and Far Eastern and others, a new form of life can be found, that is to have two functions: it should, if established, lead away out of the dead end in which Western civilisation finds itself; and it should lift the so-called underdeveloped world out of its pre-historic stage and allow it to enter the stream of history, which now would have a different pattern. To be able to do so, this new way of life would have to reformulate man's scientific outlook. It is not merely a question of changing the method of scientific research; it is a question of changing the structure of scientific discourse. All the other consequences, social, economic, and political, would follow. And this change of scientific discourse implies a new philosophy, just as radical as new as was the philosophy of the Renaissance which brought about science. The whole problem therefore turns around this point: will Brazil succeed in formulating a philosophy meaningful not only to itself, but to the rest of the world? If so, the attempts now in progress there will have an important influence on the immediate future. If not, the whole experiment can very well come to nothing. Attempts at such a philosophy are being made at present. Nobody can say what will come of them. They concern mostly the structure of thought and have to do with language and translation. Very much depends, it seems to me, on these apparently very abstract endeavors.

Let me now resume what I wanted to tell you: the world is now divided into the so-called developed and underdeveloped countries. This division is the paramount problem of the immediate future. It can end in catastrophe, or it can end in an enormous enrichment of our experience and in a broadening of meaning of life. Brazil participates in this division, by her Western and African heritage, but also by other elements in her structure. There is an attempt going on in that country, which tries to surpass the division. It is possible, because in that country the elements intertwine as possible nowhere else in the world. Some results have already been achieved, many more are in the making. We cannot say yet whether the attempt will succeed or come to nothing. But one thing we can say, I believe, namely this: the necessary climate of mutual openness and readiness to learn has already been established. It is to this openness, I believe, that a large part of Brazilian thought is committed.