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SHORT-TERM POLITICS AND LONG-TERM RELIGION: A Vision of the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil in April 1978

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It is a matter of public record that Brazil's Roman Catholic Church stands today in the vanguard of the defense of Human Rights and of the return of the nation to the rule of law. It is also undeniable that the Church has become the chief standard-bearer of a rapidly growing, civilian opposition movement that represents diverse classes, regions, and institutions intent on wresting power from the armed forces and vesting it back again in civilian hands, where it rightly belongs.

For long-time observers of Catholicism in Latin America, the current situation of the Church in Brazil is doubly unprecedented. For one, it places the third largest Roman Catholic hierarchy in the world squarely and unanimously in defense of progressive values and freedoms, hardly a position that might have been envisaged for the Church just a decade ago. For another, it assigns to Catholicism as a whole a role of political leadership in Brazilian society that is both historically singular and, for the most part, at variance with the Church's previous behavior as one of many competitors for privilege, often at odds with the very secular forces it now leads.

Lest we succumb to the temptation of envisioning a new millenium in which organized religion becomes a midwife to fraternity and justice for all, we would do well to submit these two recent developments to the scrutiny of historical and political analysis. In doing so, we can hope to come away from the examination not merely better informed, but above all realistically lucid about the real potential of Catholicism in bringing about a new social order in Brazil.

I

Let us first look at the unanticipated origin of this new-won internal unity of the Brazilian hierarchy, 350 bishops strong and since 1952 united in the country-wide National Conference of Brazilian Bishops.

The CNBB (the Portuguese acronym for the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil) had no precedent in canon law or world Catholic history. By and large, it was an ingenious response to deal with the growing centralization of the post-war Brazilian state, on the one hand, and the church's internal need to shore up both declining vocations to the religious life and its fast-eroding influence among increasingly secularized workers, students and intellectuals on the other.

However successful the CNBB might have become as a lobby for the Church's interests, internal unity and ideological harmony--so widely touted today--were by no means its forte.

Not surprisingly for an institution that reflects diverse classes, regions and uneven economies within a continent-sized nation, a wide range of divisions and differences were manifest from the start. In the 1950's, for example, Thomists vied with Maritainists in heated debates over Catholicism's need to endorse liberal democracy, while prelates from the improverished Northeast of Brazil monopolized the levers of power within the CNBB and collaborated with the State to contain rural turmoil.

By the 1960's, the great majority of the country's bishops vociferously opposed the socialist-inclined option of Catholic youth. In 1964, many prelates warmly embraced the military regime whose avowed anti-communism and defense of the Christian West struck a responsive chord among the country's essentially conservative clerics.

Even as recently as 1970, a sizeable wing of the hierarchy, albeit a minority, implicitly sanctioned the repression meted out by the regime against its critics. Within this same minority, a few bishops unashamedly went so far as to label several confreres as "reds" and "subversives," accusing them of constituting a "dangerous left-wing current" within the Church.

How then did the CNBB, this politically divided and ideologically conservative institution, eventually achieve its current unity to champion human rights? Some ascribe a decisive influence to the fresh winds rising off the Tiber during Vatican Council II; others to the theologically liberating Andean thaw issuing on the heels of the second Latin American Bishops Conference held in Medellín a decade ago. But both are only partially correct.

Of perhaps greatest significance in shaping the CNBB's internal unity were political processes at work within Brazil and among the three key factions into which Brazil's bishops consequently came to fall. First of all, the "progressive" bishops--led by the celebrated Archbishop of Recife and advocate of Christian socialism, Dom Helder Câmara--had failed in 1965 to win reelection to the CNBB Secretariat which they had directed almost exclusively since 1952. The majority moderates,

or "pastoralists" (as they have come to be known), who were mostly taciturn by-standers of the 1964 military coup, then took office in a compromise to keep the vociferous minority of pro-revolutionary conservative prelates at bay.

As a matter of practice, the progressives became more and more isolated over time and became chiefly identified with about a dozen prelates of the "Northeast faction" within the CNBB. For their part, the conservatives reflected the growing supremacy of the military state and succeeded momentarily in deterring the pastoralists from condemning outright the growing repression of the military.

But, the decisive step towards institutional unity came only four years after the military coup, as a consequence of the split in the ranks of the conservative prelates. At issue was the military's repressive measures taken against the Church, its bishops, priests, nuns and laymen. Suspected of "subversion," scores if not hundreds of religious have been arrested, tortured, imprisioned, expelled, or banished since 1968. Two priests have been murdered by still unfound assassins thought to be part of a clandestine squad of anti-communist terrorists, tacitly sanctioned by security forces of the state.

In response, one wing of the conservatives led by Dom Vicente Scherer, the Cardinal Archbishop of Pôrto Alegre, fully joined the moderate pastoralists in defense of the institutional integrity of the Church. For Scherer, the persecution of churchmen--regardless of their ideology--was not only the last straw; it was nothing less than sacrilege in a nation and by a regime which were avowedly Catholic.

As a result, the conservative ranks split, and two consequences ensued. With time, there emerged an ultra-conservative faction comprised of only two episcopal advocates and a band of dogmatists centered in the minuscule ranks of the lay Tradition, Family and Property (TFP) movement. TFP's absurd pronouncements ultimately led to admonition of their members by Rome. Last year Brazil's sole remaining ultra-conservative bishop lost his last remnant of credibility when the Vatican itself went on record against the renegade, right-wing bishop from France, Marcel Lefevre. Until then the Frenchman had been the last hope of international respectability for the now isolated Brazilian redoubt of ecclesiastical reaction.

The other consequence was the ensuing feasibility of constituting a broadly-based centrist majority within the CNBB around the unifying issue of defense of the church's physical integrity. In a sense conservative Scherer's switch gave the green light to the moderates. Previously seeking some common ground with the regime, they now moved to open opposition to the military. Moreover, the progressives' pioneering opposition had by now received daily credence as military courts sent clerics to jail and torturers showed no qualms in subjecting nuns to electric shocks. Time unmasked the terrorism of the state, and persecution made martyrs of mere men.

If there was one signal turning point in this process of unity within the CNBB, it was 1973. That year marked the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Under the aegis of an ecumenical movement--in which we must now perceive the beginnings of an eventually broader-based political coalition of diverse, secular Brazilian social forces--the Christian churches of Brazil gave their imprimatur to the Modern World's Magna Carta. They then circulated throughout the land an exegetical document demonstrating the biblical origins of each of the Declaration's thirty articles. Despite the century-long rhetoric of the anti-clerics and liberals, 1973 was the year in which the precepts of Christianity and the struggle for freedom were joined, while the perennial divisions within the CNBB were momentarily bridged.

II

In retrospect, 1973 was also the year in which the second development I spoke of earlier--the assignation of Catholicism as the chief standard-bearer of the growing civilian opposition movement--began to take shape. Was not this new role implicit in the ecumenical defense of Human Rights: In that nation-wide campaign, only the Catholic Church as the majority and historic religion of the largest Catholic nation in the world could effectively reach down into every hamlet and town. Even in the face of prior government censorship of its newspapers and the silencing of its prophets, the Church alone could (and did, when necessary) post on every chapel door of the land a resounding condemnation of oppression and impoverishment, the bitter fruits of dictatorship.

But neither the national structure of the Church--matched in scale only by that of the armed forces--nor the courage of its faithful, could alone account for the leadership role into which it was impelled. Its root causes were changes in society as a whole. Had the military not so effectively dismantled and depoliticized the civilian structures of the land--from political parties to the national union of students--the Church might never have been able to arise as today's surrogate of the social order.

Clearly, however, this uncommon transference of secular tasks to a religious institution was neither instantaneous nor inevitable. In the final analysis, it was part of a process of trust. Increasingly, churchmen demonstrated that their defense of human rights went beyond that of Catholicism's own immediate threatened cadres. In the early seventies, the national Peace and Justice Commission appealed to the regime on behalf of all the imprisoned, tortured and disappeared--regardless of their religious or political affiliation.

In early 1975, the Commission's São Paulo affiliate--which by then had entirely eclipsed the Rio-based headquarters, whose presiding archbishop's conservatism proved a crippling factor--gave the lie to the country's so-called "economic miracle." In a volume entitled São Paulo 1975: Growth and Pauperization, prepared for it by a renowned secular research center, the Commission showed how two of every three Paulistas received less than subsistence wages and underscored the threat to workers of arrests and torture for organizing, striking, and bargaining collectively. In a word, the Peace and Justice Commission called the economic miracle by its name: large-scale repression of labor and the forced starvation of the populace.

But the process of trading trust is not unilateral. From the civilian side, old suspicions and deep grudges would die hard. Liberals of the 1950's could hardly forgive the Church for its political deals with the system that secured public funds for parochial education. Marxists of the 1960's could not easily forgive the conservative hierarchy for legitimating the post-coup witch-hunts against them. Nor are they entirely convinced that Dom Helder Câmara under other circumstances will not "counter-revolutionarily" transform an adulating peasantry into a Brazilian Vendée.

But history is as much the choice of men as it is the inexorableness of world economic change. In retrospect, two successive events above all others forged the alliance of the secular civilian opposition groups under the aegis of a truly heroic churchman. I refer of course to the tragic deaths under Army torture of the Paulista journalists, Vladimir Herzog, a Jew, in October 1975 and of the militant Communist trade-unionist, Manoel Fiel Filho in January 1976.

The response of the Cardinal Archbishop of São Paulo, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, is now a matter of record. His appeal then for a united front and his continuing defiance of the arbitrariness of the military regime have been the axis of a mounting and irreversible civilian movement to restore Brazil to the rule of law.

Under the Cardinal's inspiration, it is not excessive to affirm, the Brazilian Church has either pioneered or endorsed most of the basic planks in the civilian opposition's platform: an end to torture, the abolition of censorship, the abrogation of Institutional Act No. 5 (which "legitimates" the arbitrary power of the regime), the full restoration of due process (habeus corpus); and most recently, the immediate implementation of full andunrestricted amnesty that would permit, in the very least, the return of nearly ten thousand exiles and their families.

At this moment, the Church's leadership in the struggle for freedom and justice is both unprecedented and unrivalled. But its duration is very much predictable: it must and will come to an end at the moment in which Brazilian civil society is reconstituted in all its fullness and under the security of an irradicable and inalienable rule of law.

At that moment, too, civil society can be expected to return to its proper calling: the construction of the future. On that agenda many fundamental issues--such as mass literacy and education; the relationship of private, state and multinational sectors of production; a long-overdue agrarian reform; the participation of Catholics in partisan politics--are all certain to appear.

Not one of those issues is new. Moreover, on each of them in the past, the Church--or parts of the Church--found itself in disagreement with other forces and lobbies in Brazilian society. It is not unrealistic to expect those differences to emerge again, forcefully, once the Church completes this historically specific and transitory role as surrogate for civil society under duress.

Furthermore, none of the political developments over the past decade indicates that the long-term crises affecting the very survival of Brazilian Catholicism as a social force have in any way altered. To the contrary, there is evidence that the erosion of Catholicism's historic religious monopoly continues apace: Sunday worship among the urban middle class may have ebbed even further with the rise of unbridled consumerism; popular forms of worship such as umbanda and spiritism continue to take root among the growing lower-middle class; despite a veritable rejuvenation of participation of young people in the struggle for democratic liberties, the Catholic youth movement has yet to be resurrected from its ignominious murder in the 1960's. On the whole, vocations in Brazil continue to decline, above all among women, once thought to be the backbone of an anticipated "male-less" church; neither Europe nor America can be expected any longer to fill in the gaps regarding manpower, such is also the decline of vocations there; in contrast, Catholic Europe's unfailing remission of monetary contributions over the past decade has not only intensified the Brazilian Church's dependence on foreign finances, but will very likely lay it open to bitter ecclesiastical political cleavages. Some of these are expected to ensue from the divisive ideological debate expected at the Third Latin American Episcopal Conference scheduled for Puebla, Mexico, this fall.

Thus, if the return of democratic politics promises to put an abrupt end to the internal unity of the CNBB and the leadership role which the Church as a whole has exercised in civilian society during this ignominious heyday of authoritarian military rule, what are the realistic hopes for Brazilian Catholicism over the long term?

III

As I have discussed elsewhere,* that question has been at the very heart of the changes which the Brazilian Catholic Church has experienced and promoted all along the length and breadth of the last quarter of a century. Long-term religion, rather than short-term politics, continues to lie at the heart of the Church's day-to-day concerns.

In a sense, to this generation of Catholic clergy and laity has been given nothing less than the profound responsibility to shape the destiny of Brazilian Catholicism throughout the entire western world, for which the Brazilian Church is now the largest single surrogate.

Catholicism's collective destiny seems bound to two processes now in force in Brazil. The one can be described as conscious; the other as a consequence of rapid and relentless change in the structure of the Brazilian social order. The former is tied to the policies of the CNBB or more specifically to the particular implementation of those policies within specific dioceses. The latter turns on the social recomposition of Brazilian Catholicism.

The first of these processes has been widely heralded: the proliferation of the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEB's or "base ecclesial communities" which I prefer to translate as "grass-roots congregations" (GRC's). The second is the gradual but radical transformation of Brazilian Catholicism into the nation's single largest working class association: about this few have even spoken because they have yet to see it.

Let us first turn to the Grass Roots Congregations (GRC's). These undoubtedly possess ideological precedence in the second Vatican Council's redefinition of the laity as the People of God. Within Brazil, their prefiguring of the Church of the future as a prophetic minority led Dom Helder Câmara to invoke them as "Abrahamic Communities." When all is said and done, however, their critical and historical function is to make possible the declericalization of Brazilian Catholicism, i.e., a church without a priestly caste, or rather, a priesthood open to all.

Most concur that the vocation crisis of the world church lies at the origin of the GRC's, at their devolution of cultic functions upon lay men and women, increasingly large numbers of whom are married, and who as ordained deacons or sub-deacons fall--if you will--a degree or two short of Catholicism's traditional definition of the priesthood.

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*See "Catholicism & Society in Twentieth-Century Brazil," Latin American Research Review, XI:2 (Summer 1976), 7-52.

Few still deny that the proliferation of the GRC's has been most rapid in the working class suburbs of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, among certain collectivities of rural workers and finally among indigenous tribes over whom the church has chosen to exercise the newly proclaimed tutelage of liberation. But in most dioceses, GRC's do not exist at all.

Finally, many have correctly noted that the GRC's are not merely centers of worship but very much schools of life.

It is in this last regard that the GRC's may turn out to be very much Brazilian, based on "original" social analogues of relatively recent vintage. These, in the final analysis, it seems to me, may be the most original contribution proffered Brazil and its Catholic Church by the descendants of the German and Italian immigration of a century ago.

Indeed, the persistence with which the current leadership of the Church and the CNBB (which includes important clerics of immigrant descent) has promoted the GRC's calls for explanation. Could their optimism in the viability of the GRC's as institutions stem from their own life experience? As a clergy descending from the pronouncedly European, rural immigrant milieu elaborated for more than a century in the states of Southern Brazil are the current church fathers discerning in their own past a model for Brazil's and Catholicism's future?

That immigrant experience until this present generation was rooted in virtually clergyless church services sustained by lay preachers, home cathechesis, and the communitarian fraternity typical of agrarian small-holders.

That this hypothesis seems borne out in fact--or that it at very least merits closer investigation than it has received to date--is suggested by a recent interview with the Cardinal Archbishop of São Paulo, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns.

Himself a fourth-generation descendant of German immigrants to the Brazilian South, Dom Paulo was the fourth of thirteen children, five of whom entered religious life. No stranger to toil, this faithful disciple of Saint Francis of Assisi contrasted the ephemeral presence of Catholicism as a structure to the living significance of Christian fraternity as a way of life:

> As far as I can remember no one [in my family] whether over there in the Moselle in Germany or over here was ever a priest or nun. . . .
>
> . . . Moreover . . . I never attended mass in my life except once or twice a year whenever the priest came to our region . . . .
>
> The school-teachers were the ones who really ran the whole show. They had been trained by Franciscan monks. . . . [In my own home town], two extraordinary teachers . . . molded our community.

> . . . Everything was in common: we built roads together . . . the houses of each settler, the school. . . . And the Church too. . . .
>
> The fact is that [all this is] precisely what we are trying to do today everywhere: A grass-roots congregation.

Whether the Cardinal's ambition and that of his confreres materialize may ultimately depend on their ability to reproduce the material conditions which made immigrant life both communal and tolerable. I refer of course to the land-tenure pattern of the Brazilian South. That structure--in contrast to the modal absentee-run latifundium--permitted the newcomers to own outright a holding of land, sizeable enough both to sustain large families in basic necessities and produce sufficient surplus to construct the roads and scools and churches which the Cardinal put at the center of community life.

In political terms, those conditions or their lack, can be summed up in two phrases: "agrarian reform" and a "just wage." Unless the Church goes on record in favor of both and achieves their universal application throughout Brazil, the prospects for a grass-roots Catholicism of the laity may recede into a fragment of the immigrant past.

Might Catholicism's future, however, rest less with the clergy than with the working class? Let us examine then the second process that I claimed has bearing on the Church's future: I refer to the imperceptible but undeniable, ongoing transformation of Brazilian Catholicism into the single largest working-class association in the entire history of the nation.

Before focusing on the three economic regions where this process presses ahead most markedly, a few reflections and caveats are in order. First of all, the church as a "working-class association" must not be understood as the church as a workers' party or as a trade-union movement. Upon both of these options, the hierarchy has historically entered with considerable circumspection and not always with success. Moreover, those options run counter to the ideal implied in the GRC's, to wit, the church as a school of life.

Secondly, the burden of proof about the working-class character of Brazilian Catholicism must ultimately rest on numbers. But statistics are hard to come by and some historical artistry may better serve our purpose.

Were we to characterize the class structure of Brazilian Catholicism in fifty-year leaps, several gross correlations become evident. In 1878, the Church was largely anchored in aristocratic rural elites residing outside the modern (and pro-Republican, perhaps even Masonic) coffee-producing regions of São Paulo. In 1928, under the aegis of Sebastião Leme, the future Cardinal Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, the markedly urban, upper-middle class alliance with the Church that would prevail until the early 1960's was just beginning to be forged. In 1978, it is not premature to affirm that the Church has--by circumstances and volition--shed both these coats and today finds itself donning the garb of workers and peasants who reside beyond

the city walls. After all, the GRC's are not to be found in the "Zona Suls"--the well-to-do residential areas--of the country's burgeoning metropolises.

Third and finally, to speak of the Church as the largest working association in the nation's history is not to say the Church is or will be the only one. The Church cannot seek to monopolize, but under conditions of democracy, it may once again prove itself to be highly competitive for workers' loyalties, just as it was in Brazil and elsewhere throughout this century. But the discussion of potential organizational rivalry with other labor spokesmen is not at issue here. Rather, the likelihood that Catholicism in 20th Century Brazil might more strongly resemble Methodism in early 19th century England--to wit, the alliance of a "low-church" religion with the working class--raises entirely new prospects for the ecclesiological and political dimensions of tomorrow's church.

Less speculative and readily identifiable, however, is today's process of Catholicism's proletarianization in three key economic regions of Brazil. To this discussion, we now finally turn, however briefly, in the hope of underscoring specific and general trends whose directions may portend the future.

The first of the three regions is suburban, industrial São Paulo and the Baixada Fluminense just beyond Rio de Janeiro. Inhabited by the great majority of the nation's skilled and semi-skilled industrial laborers, these areas have registered declining real wages and health standards, rising mortality rates and inflation, unemployment, underemployment, and the privation of human rights on a scale unprecedented in Brazilian history.

What is worthy of note is not only the Church's outspoken condemnation of the economic conditions which breed massive pauperization and human misery, but also its vast mobilization of the working class in these areas. For several years, this has occurred in silence, without fanfare and with all deliberation required for schooling men in a way of life.

The upshot has been the recent mushrooming of voluntary associations of all stripes and hues in a country and among workers not ordinarily thought capable of forging their own destiny. Yet in church halls and Catholic school courtyards, working-class mothers organize into clubs and skilled laborers into a state-wide movement to protest the high cost of living. Meanwhile, the bishops of São Paulo's industrial periphery, comprising the largest Catholic diocese in the world, turn over the churches to their flocks to debate government wage policies, high prices and political representation of workers free of government agents and control. If the French Catholic Church "invented" the "worker-priest," it is the Brazilian Catholic Church that has transformed him into the rule rather than the exception.

From the worker's side, there is also something different. There now exists an embryonic set of new structures--call them voluntary associations, not unlike those De Tocqueville perceived on his visit to the United States of America early in the last century--by means of which men take their destiny into their own hands. That may be the single most salutory new development in the transition of Brazilian society into a modern industrial order.

The second of the three regions is the Brazilian Northeast whose proverbial impoverishment has worsened during these "halcyon years" of the economic "miracle." The latest published reports note that 18% of the population (comprising a third of the nation's 115 million) is unemployed, while some 25% is underemployed. Starvation is rampant, while emigration to the industrial south continues on such a vast scale so as to belie the government's boast of amelioration.

True, the Church has yet to become the tool of liberation of the agrarian proletariat, burdened as it is by religious superstition and human misery. But it can be said that after four hundred years of serving up opium to the exploited masses, the Church as an institution has finally cut its ties to the rural overlords of the region and the nation.

Indeed, if there is any significance to the stand taken over these decades by Dom Helder Câmara, the "bishop of the poor," by Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, "the defender of the Indians and squatters," and by other heroic bishops of this perennial redoubt of dehumanization, it lies in the Church's recognition that for all too long it has served Caesar and Mammon all too well.

In turn and in an effort to redeem itself, the Church has become the single most important social force to legitimate a future agrarian reform of radical proportions. Even today, if there were a free election in the Northeast, the "party of the Church," in so far as it would be the "party of the agrarian reform," would probably get a third of the votes.

That is why the Church is feared, why its bishops have been silenced in the press, condemned as communists by fellow prelates and their priest-aides murdered with complicity in cold blood. Indeed, even an agrarian reform of purely capitalist inspiration--one comparable to post-war Japan's--would undermine the medium and large-sized landowners who live high off the government dole and have been the back-bone of the military regime's civilian support since 1964.

The third and last economic region of significance for the Church comprises all the old and new agrarian frontiers of the South and Southwest. These are now lands of plenty: of wheat soybeans, and other grains for export to world markets. These are also the lands of

European immigrant settlers whose descendants unto the fifth generation still speak last century's dialects of Germany and Italy, and whose numerous landless offspring have formed the vanguards of Brazilian agrarian expansion for the last half-century.

Just as their numbers left Rio Grande do Sul to turn back the forests for cultivation in Paraná and Santa Caterina during the thirties and forties, their rising populations of today are striking out into underpopulated states of Mato Grosso, and Goiás as well as beyond the defenseless agricultural borders of neighboring Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia. If there is any truth to the notion of Brazil as "sub-imperialist" power, the adjective "land-hunger" will go far in describing a primary characteristic of this expansion.

For the Church, this new frontier of the late sixties and the current decade is doubly important: Indeed, the continuity of a Euro-Brazilian Catholicism which is implied in this demographic shift can mean the continuity of both revenues and vocations. Giving money as well as sons and daughters to the Church has been the essential mark of the Brazilian South's Euro-Brazilian church. Indeed, while vocations and tithes have declined world-wide, both these resources are on the rise in Brazil's South; they may still provide Catholicism just the longevity necessary to transform the Brazilian legacy of slavery and exploitation into a heritage of self-respect and fraternal communitarianism.

V

In drawing this discussion to a close, the inevitable questions arise: how can the Church harness these three fronts of simultaneous Catholicization and proletarianization into an effective political force? Moreover, if as we concluded at the outset that neither the unity of the CNBB nor the current prevalence of the Church's leadership in the civil arena can be considered lasting, how can the church influence Brazil's future and its own? Finally, if the church lost the middle-class youth a decade ago and no longer has the interest or resources to remount the now banned, but ineffectual Christian Democratic Party, what will be its new instruments for winning a measure of influence or power?

Perhaps, wisdom lies in allowing the newly-forming, working-class cadres of the Church to resolve that question themselves. Perhaps, if a new populist movement arises tomorrow in defense of rural and urban workers conceived in a social democratic mold, workers themselves might choose to join in defense of their own interests.

Such a party would not only be the largest in the Western Hemisphere, but potentially one of the largest in the world.

Indeed only once before--nearly a century ago--did history offer the option of such a socialist party; but the petty dogmatism and intransigence of the Papacy and the world socialist movement together conspired to deprive the European working class of a single instrument of their own redemption.

Whether history will serve us up a second chance is hard to say. But if it does so in Brazil in the near future, at least two historic summits might then be ready to scale: the common militance of Catholics and Marxists in a single workers party and the unity of workers everywhere in the third world. Whether those issues will indeed be on Catholicism's agenda depends on all of us.

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A GRAMSCIAN CRITIQUE OF DELLA CAVA'S "SHORT-TERM POLITICS AND LONG-TERM RELIGION"*.

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I was very impressed by two characteristics of Ralph's paper and presentation. One is what Ralph himself has called his "historical artistry." He used the expression with a somewhat apologetic tone, to justify his attempt at explaining some of the popular activities of the Church aimed at "long-term religion," in the absence of organized empirical evidence to back up his analysis. But I don't think such an attempt by a historian needs any apology. On the contrary, I believe we political scientists are very much indebted to historians precisely in this area, in our need to integrate apparently unconnected historical events into a coherent and dynamic framework. In fact, I am afraid that much too often we have used our models of explanation in ways that do not integrate adequately the evidence which may account for historical change and cultural transformations. Both structural-functionalism and the mechanistic versions of Marxism have often revealed their inability to explain historical change, both in the field of Church-state relations and in other studies of Latin American culture and institutions. It seems to me, therefore, that Ralph's proposal very aptly suggests, throughout his paper, the need for new models of explanation capable of surpassing our usually ahistorical and formalistic approaches.

Secondly, I was also positively impressed by what Ralph acknowledged in his presentation to be his "categorical rhetoric"--with the proviso, however, that I would not call it "rhetoric," but rather "militancy." And I must say I find this quality of Ralph's work a very necessary intellectual posture, rather than a simple question of language or style. Really, quite often we have had our works labelled here and there as ideological pieces, at the service either of the C.I.A. or the Communist Party (or even both). And it is certain that our academic work will always have political consequences. If this is the case, then I don't see why, instead of having our work simply "used" for political ends and tendencies, we should not declare openly what political results and consequences we expect from our academic work. I believe social scientists have a very important political responsibility as intellectuals, and in this respect Ralph's paper sets an example and a challenge to all of us.

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Having said this, I must suggest also that historical analysis and political commitment have to be undertaken within a discrete set of parameters, in order to be effective. There have been changes in the international political role of the Church during the last decade, and also in the impact of the new social relations of production of world capitalism in Latin America. Important as these international changes may be, and influential as they are in our continent, my opinion is that we should concentrate on the problems of power and legitimacy where these problems actually occur, and will eventually have to be solved--that is, at the national level. In other words, I suggest that since there is not as yet anything like an international institutional order which might be called a "world-state," we shall have to concentrate our analysis of religion and politics at the level of the nation-state, in order to be effective. And this is especially true in cases like the present situation in Brazil, where one sees that social forces and political phenomena tend to achieve a relative autonomy vis-a-vis outward pressures and international determinations.

I will not attempt a conjunctural analysis of what is presently occurring in Brazil; Ralph is the one who has tried to do that. But it is worthwhile to remember that the phenomena he tries to detect and explain in the life of the Church are part of a wider process of change, a new relationship which starts to take place between the state and civil society as a whole. Looking at this process in very broad and impressionistic terms one can see:

First, from the side of the state, the crisis of a regime which is illegitimate by definition, since it has been obliged to rely, from its inception in 1964, on force and coercion rather than on any form of organized consensus or political participation. It is also true, however, that from the beginning the regime has attempted to maintain, and at times even to develop, a façade or appearance of legitimacy or constitutional "normality." The Brazilian military regime could even be considered a special case among Latin American military dictatorships, in that it systematically attempted to make concessions to democratic formalism. It maintained, for instance, the activities of the Parliament and Judiciary, permitted an official "opposition," and repeatedly tried to legalize its actions through Constitutional reform. It is also known, however, that these concessions have up to the present been only of a formal nature, since the opposition, the Congress and Judiciary are only nominally independent, and were in fact even "Constitutionally" declared as subordinate to the Executive branch and to the military in charge.

But the interesting and important fact is that in recent times this faked legitimacy started to be questioned from within, for instance, through massive electoral support of the opposition, and through various challenges to the government by the civilian Judiciary and even by sectors of the military. These facts indicate, therefore, profound changes and contradictions within the state itself, and growing rifts among sectors of the civilian-military establishment.

Simultaneously with these changing conditions in the state, one sees a growing movement and initiative in civil society, a process of convergence and unity among the various non-state institutions, such as the Churches, the unions, the press, the National Bar Association, the Universities and the cultural world in general, all calling for a return of the "Estado de direito." That this phenomenon expresses different and even contradictory interests can be easily illustrated by the fact that sectors of the upper classes, such as the Business Associations, have also demonstrated for "liberty," "democracy" (however "limited") and for "free-negotiation" with the union movement.

This new sense of initiative and convergence in civil society has achieved so far important results. Political space has been created and the regime influenced to open up--bringing freedom of the press, lifting of censorship in almost all of the media, and a generalized political debate among the Brazilian population unknown since the infamous Ato Institucional No. 5 of 1968.

It is within this wider context that one has to understand Ralph's interpretation of the political role of the Church, both in terms of "short-term politics" and "long-term religion." Ralph asked me to criticize his paper using Gramsci's categories, and it seems to me that Ralph's distinction between short-term politics and long-term religion could be usefully compared with Gramsci's distinction between "conjunctural" and "organic" phenomena.[1]

Gramsci considered "organic" phenomena as much more important than "conjunctural" phenomena, because the first term referred to fundamental displacements among the main contending social classes. These displacements would occur when the dominant class either rose or fell, with a corresponding (but not always necessary or actually existent) rise or fall of the main subordinated class. The displacement would mean, in the case of the dominant class, the loss or gain of support from its associated classes and also the loss or gain of support from the subordinated classes. In the case of a simultaneous displacement in the position of the main subordinated class, this would mean the gain or loss of support by this class from other subordinated classes in society. It is clear then that an "organic" phenomenon such as it was conceived by Gramsci consists of a process of legitimation/delegitimation. It is therefore a process which is mainly cultural and ideological, though intimately related to economic and political conditions prevalent in any given situation.

There are many problems with trying to apply these concepts to a concrete historical situation. Perhaps one of the greatest problems is that it is very hard to differentiate "organic" phenomena from simple circumstantial incidents and other non-fundamental events. For all events have to be analysed and distinguished from one another when they are combined in a particular "conjunctural" context, where both "organic" and "non-organic" factors are at play, and deeply influence one another.

In fact, in a particular dynamic situation, such as the ones described by Gramsci as "organic crises" (complete deligitimation) or even in the case of a crisis "from above" (delegitimation within the dominant classes), incidental and conjunctural phenomena may take on lasting significance and influence decisively the outcome of the crisis. Thus, in such fluid and transitional crises even non-fundamental social actors and institutions are expected to interact dynamically and weigh heavily on the final results of the crises.

It is clear then that such a framework of discussion cannot be used properly in our commentary of Ralph's paper without a thorough "conjunctural" analysis of what is going on in Brazil these days. In the absence of such an analysis one can say, nevertheless, that Ralph pinpoints in his paper some very important phenomena, in terms of what he considers as the political "short-term" and the religious "long-term" roles of the Church in Brazil. For instance, I believe one can safely agree with him, when he says that the role of the Church in short-term politics falls into the realm of temporary or "conjunctural" phenomena, especially when he speculates about a "surrogate" role of the Church as representative of all of the opposition.

I would like to stress a couple of points on this last issue: First, I believe that the "surrogate" role of the Church in promoting the unity and convergence of civil society was best demonstrated by Ralph in the terms of "catalyst" or "precipitant" crisis situations, such as the death of Herzog and the action of Cardinal Arns. Once the crisis was past, and the convergence among the various sectors had begun, it seems to me it becomes more difficult to speak of a continuing "surrogate" role of the Church. I would suggest it makes more sense of subsequent facts to describe the process as one of multilateral interaction and reinforcement among the various social actors, in which the Church is only one--albeit an important one--among many non-state institutions.

I would even go as far as to suggest that perhaps one of the crucial aspects in a process of delegitimation ("from above" or otherwise) is that it becomes difficult to single out and isolate one leading social force or institution as responsible for the process. And that might even account for the impossibility of containing the delegitimation process through the usual repressive means. Thus, if Arns or any other individual or institutional actor were a "continuous surrogate" for the delegitimation process, it would still be possible to isolate him as an "infiltrated" or "subversive" divergent force in the system, as has often been done in the past with Helder Câmara and numerous other leaders in Brazilian society.

And this brings us to the "long-term religion" of Ralph's interpretation about the political role of the Church. This is where the comparison with Gramsci's "organic" phenomena is of the utmost importance for a criticism of Ralph's argument. The main point here is to know

whether the present activity and initiative in civil society responds to a displacement among the upper classes, to a growing ascendancy of the main subordinated class, or to both. The answer to this question will only be clear historically when the current transitional crisis is over, and we are faced with a rearrangement of the present power-bloc or with another bloc altogether different. But one may bet on the outcome, through a careful conjunctural analysis, and through the practical proposal of political alliances, the formation of parties, political fronts and movements. Many people are trying to do that in Brazil nowadays, and--again--it is a virtue of Ralph's paper that he also accepts this political role and proposes his own analysis and outcome.

My impression is that Ralph proposes an interpretation of current events in Brazil as if they were part of an "organic crisis," that is a process of complete delegitimation, due to a displacement of the main subordinated class to a position of leadership among the other non-dominant classes in society. It seems to me that this is why Ralph can now suggest a new alliance (in fact an entirely new stage for the social alliances of the Church in Brazil) between the Church leadership and the working class. I believe this interpretation can be criticized, from a Gramscian perspective, on more than one ground.

First, it seems to me that most of the events singled out by Ralph's "historical artistry" as representative of "long-term religious" changes in the Church undoubtedly indicate a growing commitment and activity of Church circles along with the subordinated classes. But I believe these events do not substantiate, as Ralph maintains, a direct working class alignment of the Church. To start with, the three areas of popular work of the Church in which Ralph notes this alignment taking place, present entirely heterogeneous phenomena to my mind, and not necessarily a strategy of working-class alliance by the Church.

In the Northeast, for instance, there may be sectors of unionized workers, and areas of capitalist social relations; but Ralph himself affirms that the banner of the Church is agrarian reform, which is yet to take place there. Who are the social bearers of this ideology in the Northeast? Or, to put it differently, what are the social sectors with which the Church identifies in the Northeast? Who may eventually assume leadership and benefit from a process of land reform? One immediate response to these questions would point to the peasant movement, with whom the Church has become progressively involved since the early 50s. But there are even sectors of the dominant class which would also benefit from land reform. There is no question, however, that agrarian reform is also a banner of the working class movement (at least of its more advanced sectors, as it was shown in the general demands of the recent strikes in São Paulo). Nevertheless, the problem is: to what extent is the Northeast Church, and for that matter the Northeast peasant movement, in any way allied to--and led by--the working class?

In short, there are several political actors and social forces in Brazil that are interested in agrarian reform. And the claim for land reform by the Church does not necessarily imply a working class alignment. I am sorry if these comments sound rather pedantic and perfunctory, as if one were trying to divide the popular movement and criticize the progressive attitudes of the Church. The problem, however, is that both for the sake of clarity and for the sake of unity, one needs to differentiate (not necessarily divide) the social actors, in order that one can understand their objective interests. This way one may eventually conclude whether there is an "organic" convergence of these interests, or not.

The second case presented by Ralph of "long-term religious" action by the Church, along the South/Center "colonization belt," is acknowledged by him in various parts of the paper to be a social phenomenon altogether different from the workers' movement. This is clear when he relates the origins of the "comunidades de base" to the rural migrants' communities of the South. The difference appears in the characteristics of the "colonization" process itself, such as: the organization of small parcels of land, a self-reliant family-economy, and even its petit-bourgeois orientations and values. And it is also significant that Ralph seems to rely heavily on the cultural and social characteristics of the latter phenomena for his suggestions about the future of "long-term religion" (or a "moral and intellectual reform" as Gramsci used to say) in the grass-roots of the Church.

If this is the case (and especially if, as Ralph maintains, this were a kind of "Methodist" reformation led by the Church) then it is extremely difficult to accept such trends as phenomena in which the working class has any hegemonic role. In fact, even in the case of the third region he mentioned, that of São Paulo/Rio, where the popular movement is closely linked to the working class, the role Ralph assigns to the church is also doubtful, considering for instance the present labor awakening and unrest.

It is certain that the Church (especially in São Paulo) has already acted directly among the working class for many years, and has also indirectly supported the workers through its general strategy of "organizing the poor," being "the voice of the voiceless," etc. It can even be said that the Church has in the last decade performed a "long-term" or latent "surrogate role" in this area (to use Ralph's categories in a somewhat different way). It was here, for instance, that the former Catholic Action was kept alive somehow, in some important and precise places. And here the presence of Pastoral Operaria, and other programs with direct links to the Church, have certainly supported and stimulated the forms of resistance which have emerged among sectors of the working class. Furthermore, in the political scenario as a whole, the action of the official Church institutions and authorities

together with other sectors of civil society, is surely helping the workers to recover "breathing space," to mature their own strategy and their authentic forms of resistance and organization.

However, no one could maintain seriously, that the strike of June 1978 in São Paulo was in any way led or initiated by the Church, even by working class militants of the Church. This is not to say that the latter did not participate; they have in fact actively supported the movement, and this is true even in the case of Church institutions and authorities. But it is one thing to support or participate, and something very different to lead the movement. Recent studies have shown that the new initiative and awakening of the workers in this area originate in the more advanced sectors of the São Paulo industry, among a new generation and a new strata of the Brazilian working class.[2] The present "spontaneous" strikes and movements are thus better accounted for by the existence of a new leadership, caused by new social relations or production in their industries. I would emphasize the "social" dimension of these new productive relations and their political consequences.

Therefore, it is not simply that new forms of organization derived mechanistically from different material conditions. Rather, these workers of the more technologically advanced industries have a greater bargaining power than their counterparts in the more traditional industrial sectors. They are also better educated and skilled workers. Thus, they had the conditions which allowed them to escape the "straight jacket" of the old corporative union structure controlled by the state, and to form their more or less spontaneous and autonomous movements. These are now achieving gradual recognition, for "free negotiation" with the upper classes.

It is clear, nevertheless, that the process is more complex than what I have been describing here in very broad strokes. And I am not saying that the Church or that Christian working class militants do not have an influence on the workers' movement. I am only questioning Ralph's interpretation of the Church's role and trying to put it in what seems to me to be a more balanced perspective. I share with Ralph the concern for the participation of the workers who belong to the Church, and who accept its orientations, in a unitary movement of broad popular proportions and strategy. And I also believe that many of these Christian militants would eventually join such a movement, as many have done in the past, even with Marxist parties and movements. But I am much more pessimistic than Ralph is about the political limits of the action of the Church, and also about what its militants will do when in isolation from other sectors of the working class and the popular movement. I believe the history of other countries has shown the tendencies of Social-Christianity to act in isolation and to divide the popular movement, starting from the base.

Until now, we have been spared in Brazil, the formation of a truly national and massively-based Christian Democratic party. I also believe that, continuing the present trends in the Church and in society, it would be difficult and perhaps even impossible to form such a party in Brazil. But this does not exclude the possibility that Social-Christianity might appear disguised under a new facade and a more attractive appearance. In this sense, Ralph's proposal as it stands in this paper, might well serve the interests of such an attempt. I know that this is not Ralph's intent, and I hope he will forgive me for stressing this possibility. But if his proposal for a new Socialist Party supported by the Church is not necessarily led by the working class, as I tried to suggest, who would be its hegemonic force? A conjunctural analysis of the present transitional crisis in Brazil will probably reveal its character as a crisis in the power-bloc, or of a delegitimation "from above," rather than as a movement "from below." In order to orient their activities in civil society and the new initiative within the workers' movement, the Brazilian subordinated classes need to develop an autonomous historical project, through a careful control of their alliances and the continuous strengthening of their unity. This being the case, any attempt to divide and hegemonize externally the popular movement would only benefit the dominant classes, and solve the latter's basic problem of lack of consensus and legitimacy.

Finally, and to summarize my argument, I suggest that one cannot come to a positive conclusion that--on the basis of its internal differentiation, or even of its linkages with the popular classes--the role of the Church will eventually be positive. In fact, the existence of structural differentation, in the Church or in society as a whole, is not a guarantee of a subsequent progressive development in politics. And even if the Church succeeds, as Ralph proposes, in achieving "long-term religion" among its rank-and-file (with "comunidades de base" everywhere, etc.), history has shown in other contexts that similar phenomena have brought about the opposite of working class hegemony. Ralph's paper suggests, therefore, very important and urgent themes of research and action, besides raising questions about our own methods and models of analysis in the social sciences which are still far from answered.

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