

Brazil and the Illusion of the Rich: An Island of Prosperity Surrounded by Misery and Suffering

Interview with Frei Betto

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Frei Betto (Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo) was born in 1944 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. He began his political engagement as Catholic student and was imprisoned by the military regime that seized power in 1964 and ruled until 1985. I interviewed him first in 1986 after the publication of his book of interviews Fidel and Religion. This is the first of two interviews given in December 2018 after the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil.[1]

Dr. T. P. Wilkinson: When we met in 1986, the Brazilian military regime was considered at an end and elected government was to be restored. 32 years later a man has been elected who claims allegiance to the military regime. He is quoted saying the military should have tortured less and killed more. You were imprisoned under that regime. Could you briefly sketch the developments in Brazil since 1986 as you saw them? Has Brazil returned to military-style rule, if not actual dictatorship?

Frei Betto: The Brazilian military dictatorship began in 1964 and ended in 1985. The civil society of our country has made important accomplishments since then: a new constitution approved in 1988, called the “Civilian Constitution”; social movements of national scale, like the CUT (Unique Workers Central), the MST (Landless Workers Movement), the CMP (Popular Movements Central) and the MTST (Homeless Movement Workers).

We elect five and a half presidential terms, led by progressive politicians: Fernando Henrique Cardoso (two terms, 1995-1998 and 1999-2002), Lula (2003-2006 and 2007-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2014 and 2015-2016, when it was ended in a leadership coup by vice president Michel Temer). In this period, from 1995 until 2016, Brazil made significant advances in the social sphere, with a reduction of inequality and the inclusion of thousands of families that previously lived in misery and poverty. Only under the Lula government, 36 million people found social inclusion.

TPW: In the 1980s there were several prominent people in the Church who were identified with democratic ideals, peace and justice, for example Cardinal Arnês in Sao Paulo- and as whom I met later Archbishop Dennis Hurley in Durban. There were also ecumenical movements pursuing justice in Brazil and South Africa. However it seems that once the military dictatorship was ended and the apartheid government replaced by the ANC, the Church lost its profile and many of those people associated with the struggles left the stage. Is there still an active Church-based movement in Brazil and where is it now? What challenges does it face?

FB: It is necessary to understand that the end of the dictatorship in Brazil coincided with the election of John Paul II, followed by Benedict XVI. There were 34 years of conservative

pontificates that did not support the line of the CEB (basic church communities) and the theology of liberation. This opened space for the evangelical churches with their conservative profile.

There still exists at the base a church that is alive and combative, but without prominent figures like Cardinal Arnz and Dom Pedro Casaldáliga. Fortunately with Pope Francis this progressive pastoral work resumes. The canonisation of Monsignor Oscar Romero was very important for the recognition of the Church of liberation and the poor. And it is very active in Brazil and Latin America with feminist theology, indigenous theology, black theology and eco-theology.

TPW: In 1986, there was still a Soviet Union, a GDR, and “competition” in Europe to demonstrate the “best” social-economic system for the majority of citizens. By 1990, all that was gone. Two years ago Fidel Castro died. It is putting it mildly to say the world has changed since 1986. It has been argued that the Soviet Union actually contributed little to social-economic justice in the rest of the world, despite claims to the contrary. However since its demise there appears to be no limit to the expansion and aggressivity of the “Western” system. Unrestricted capitalism has “won”. It would appear that there is no longer a vision of what a just world could look like capable of providing orientation, especially on a global scale. You are certainly critical but not a pessimist. Where do you see the potential for social justice in future? What obstacles do you consider most important to overcome?

FB: Socialism had the merit of forcing the rich world to concede more rights to workers. Without the communist “threat”, there would have been no welfare state in Western Europe. Now, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, capitalism no longer needs rings because it does not lose its fingers... It has changed its productive phase for one of speculation and, as Piketty demonstrates, concentrates ever more profits into fewer hands.[2]

This gaping inequality has a limit, which is the desperation of the poor, like the waves of refugees flooding into the world of the rich and the demonstrations here in France, the yellow vests. It is an illusion of the rich to think that they can have an island of prosperity surrounded by misery and suffering.

Seven centuries before Christ, the prophet Isaiah already preached that peace can only exist with the fruits of justice. And we can add today: there will never be peace as a simple balance of weapons.

TPW: Your interviews with Castro revealed a remarkable man quite different from the personality depicted or caricatured since the Cuban Revolution succeeded in 1959. Anyone who followed his writing and speeches, even after retirement, could see that your portrait was accurate and sincere. The survival of the Cuban Revolution after the fall of the Soviet Union could be seen as proof that it was not a “Soviet creation” but a genuinely Cuban phenomenon, like Castro himself. In fact Cuba managed, despite US policy, to support social-economic change in Latin America, esp. in cooperation with Chavez in Venezuela. How do you see Cuba today, esp. in relation to its Latin American neighbours?

FB: Cuba resists despite all pressure from the White House. Today, all Latin American countries support Cuban sovereignty and vote in the UN, with the support of more than 170 countries, for the suspension of the blockade. For Cuba’s economy, so damaged by the

isolation the country has been condemned to, relations with the progressive governments of Latin America and the world are very important. However, Venezuela faces a serious economic crisis. And Brazil—starting in January—will be governed by a fascist party allied with the US policy of preserving the blockade. Fortunately Mexico now has a progressive government that can strengthen ties of solidarity with Cuba, especially by absorbing Cuban doctors who have been expelled from Brazil.[3]

TPW: Venezuela has been under a kind of siege since Chavez became president that is at least as challenging as the US embargo of Cuba. Now Brazil has a president who has announced a very aggressive attitude toward the government in Caracas. Venezuela is not as radical as Cuba was. Chavez and Castro were sometimes presented as if they were a pair, both with very personalistic leadership styles. Have you formed a view of the situation in Venezuela, a direct neighbour of Brazil? Sometime around 1962 the US initiated activities that culminated in the 1964 military coup in Brazil under the pretext that Goulart would align Brazil with Cuba and the Soviet Union— something to prevent. Do you see an international context to the recent presidential election results— esp. given the vitriolic statements made about Venezuela by the new president and the intense conflict between the US and both Russia and China— part of the so-called BRICS group?

FB: I think tensions between US and both China and Russia will worsen. The Cold War is back. And Latin America is the target of this conflict. The countries of the Continent know that they cannot go on without the import of their products by China. And they fear Trump's protectionist measures. So my assessment is that this reheating of the Cold War will be favorable to the Latin American economy.

TPW: You are described among other places on the website of the Dominican Order in Germany as a “political activist”.[4] One could say that the Dominican order, the OP, was founded as an “activist” order. Not everyone would agree that the order's history of activism has been very positive— esp. those familiar with the history of the Inquisition. Did your activism grow out of your vocation or do you believe your choice to become a Dominican was shaped by an at least latent desire to “preach”, to be an activist? How do you see your activism as a Dominican and the contradictions of the order's role in history?

FB: The Dominican Order, like our families, has its side of light and its side of darkness. There is no chemically pure institution. In 800 years of history, the Order had the sad page of the Inquisition, but is also proud to have had among its friars Thomas Aquinas, Savonarola, Giordano Bruno, Fra Angelico, Master Eckhart, Vitoria, Tomaso de Campanella, Bartolomé de las Casas and Father Lebrecht.

I entered the Dominicans because of my admiration for their presence in Brazil, along with the indigenous movement, the student movement and popular movements. I did not know that I am inscribed in the annals of the German Dominicans as a “political activist.” This honors me very much, because it puts me next to another political activist, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus did not die of hepatitis in bed, but like so many political prisoners in Latin America: he was arrested, tortured, tried by two political powers and sentenced to death on the cross. I thank God for being a disciple of this political prisoner who, within Caesar's reign, announced another possible kingdom, that of God.

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Notes

[1] Translation assisted by Prof Dr Francisco Topa, Universidade de Porto

[2] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*(2013)

[3] In the wake of his election, Jair Bolsonaro demanded that several thousand Cuban physicians employed in parts of the Brazil with little or no medical care would have to leave the country if the Cuban government did not comply with his demands that full wages be paid in Brazil and that families be permitted to move to Brazil with the seconded medical personnel. The Cuban government rejected this attempt by Brazil to extract Cuban medical professionals and deprive Cuba of the income agreed under the Dilma (PT) government in return for Cuba's medical mission. See "Cuba to pull doctors out of Brazil after President-elect Bolsonaro comments", *The Guardian*, 14 November 2018.

[4] www.dominikanerorden.de

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