

development and civilisations



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Editorial

Thinking differently

All has been said. That is the feeling gathered after reading Chico Whitaker's paper whose more developed original version also touches on the political and institutional problems facing Brazil "after Lula". All has been said, because the writer, an untiring fighter, faces realities with determination. He does not call for denial. He does not urge the removal of those responsible. His logic is that of a fair, democratic and intellectual resistance. And this logic demands an altogether different way of thinking.

In our latest issue, we published a series of stories as well as our call for a "new dynamism" for the international network led by the Le Bret-Ir Fed Centre. One month later, we could not dream of a better follow-up. What Chico Whitaker writes about Brazil could nearly become our charter. Because "breaking away" requires daring, reflecting on alternatives and a stubborn defense. It also requires to be realistic when certain new proposals are not workable or end down a one-way street.

Next February, we shall be present at the Dakar World Social Forum. It was there, among other places, that Father Louis-Joseph Le Bret worked, as he did later in Brazil, on an alternative development model. Meanwhile, let us read his writings again. Let us pursue the debate that Chico Whitaker has brilliantly opened. We wish you an excellent New Year, and may 2011 allow us to dream too!

Richard Werly
publications@lebret-irfed.org

Allow me to dream of another Brazil, of another world

by Chico Whitaker*

It required courage and lucidity on the part of Chico Whitaker to break away from the praises presently given to Brazil's success. Yes his pride of being a Brazilian is unscathed. Yes, Lula will have left his mark on his country. But all that should not hide inequalities or unacceptable drifts. And above all, one should not have capitalism unleashed as sole horizon for this new giant.

Our history is blocked by two huge obstacles, well beyond the problem of "growth" of our economy. They make up the major factors that disallow the balancing of the pernicious social debt built up in Brazil over the centuries. This has led to the shameful inequalities that today characterize our country, one of the world leaders in this macabre championship. I am perfectly aware that the next government will not, alone, clear these obstacles. It will have to rely on the sum of actions of a whole generation, and maybe beyond. That is why I chose the title of this paper: "Allow me to dream a little..."

The first obstacle is the way in which executive and legal powers connect in Brazil. This is an institutional problem.

The second is – very clearly, and allow my daring – the capitalistic economic system in which we are immersed. I beg the reader to forgive the impudence of such a statement... Nevertheless, it is dramatic to witness the absence of a debate on this subject in Brazil, except in the intellectual or militant circles who continue to discuss lectures by the old theoreticians criticizing capitalism. Except also among certain politicians who are not scared of becoming or remaining ineligible. It all happens as

if, we, Brazilians, were definitely condemned to live with this economic system and the political regimes that nurture it. Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister would be very happy to witness that in Brazil, we are definitely convinced of the accuracy of her campaign slogan: TINA – There Is No Alternative. In other words, all can and must be solved by market mechanisms. To be even clearer: less the State regulates, better things are.

Infrastructures rather than humans

Fukuyama, the North-American, endowed the world at the time of the fall of the Berlin wall, with a widely-spread article wherein he announced the "End of History". He also would be very happy if he were to land in Brazil. He would witness how much our huge country full of promises is now integrated into the territories conquered by the capitalist globalization that is voracious, oppressive and unifying, and has spread to the whole surface of the Earth after the fall of the Wall.

Why so? The reason is that in our successive governments, the "economic teams" have most naturally, and without the slightest hesitation, adopted a frame of mind that is totally integrated into the capitalist regime. It is as if these teams thought: such are

* Chico Whitaker, born in 1931 in Brazil, studied architecture, and is a Brazilian alterglobalist campaigner who used to belong to the Workers' Party. He co-founded the World Social Forum and was former Executive Secretary of the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission. He was awarded the alternative Nobel Prize in 2006.

the facts, and let's do as best we can in this framework... The objective is economic growth that one labels 'development' to help swallow the pill. Some, more lucid, add: yes, but wealth must be distributed. Some, called "developmentists", only think of the necessary infra-structures. They take no account of the arguments that they consider ingenious, even if they are put forward by some documents of the Catholic Church, such as aiming at the "development of the whole person and of all persons".¹

For this reason, one cannot expect anything else from the "economic commentators" in the media who talk daily of happenings in the "world of economy". As they do their brain-washing, not a single doubt crosses their own brain on the validity of the system. And when things seem to go well, as at this time with the end of Lula's tenure, they even manage to have a large part of the population forget social inequalities – until they trip over a homeless person, or are victims to urban violence. Even better: we all end up feeling some "patriotic" pride when people tell us that Brazil is finally "taking-off" towards the "First World", or is emerging as a new major power, or is jumping from eighth to the seventh place in the world economy. And possibly we feel some satisfaction, albeit slightly ashamed, when we are told that several Brazilians are listed among the richest persons of the planet.

So, our radio networks take it upon themselves to inform us, several times a day, of the stock exchange movements, here and on the major financial markets of the world. In effect, all studies show, to everyone's joy, an increase in the number of Brazilian investors – big and small – who try to make profits on these financial markets. Equally, the number of our enterprises that capture funds for their expansion is on the increase. Our major companies avidly support every large infrastructure project launched by the government, whatever its impact on the environment. And then they are angry at Indians or ecologists that block the roads to stop their tractors and trucks on the way to the huge profits expected.

There is worse: Brazilian companies that go multinational act towards the human communities abroad, with the same destructive violence, as the capitalist corporations of the past

colonial powers or the large enterprises of more powerful countries. Everywhere, the position to be taken is that of "competitiveness", a fundamental requirement for those who have the "spirit of enterprise" – at home, at school, at work, in sport, in the development of corporations, even in leisure.

Facing the capitalist steamroller

It is quite evident that to overcome this economic system, as we want, we shall face world-wide obstacles. There will be need of more than a few adjustments, on the Brazilian mode, as if we had to do with a small domesticable monster. We are facing a terrible giant that presently dominates nearly the whole earth, and plays with the world as with a small ball in its hands. Born over 500 years ago, it has developed, without any pre-established theory, the practice that defines its orientation as things go along.

Having torn down the Iron Curtain in Europe, its logic has even managed to gradually destroy the Chinese Wall. It has developed its muscles in a continuous fight for self-assertion, it has instigated wars, confronted terrorists, deposed or murdered political leaders, whatever the country, when one dares to put to question its power. It has enlisted innumerable human brains in the best university

centres, to study its crises and find the ways of surmounting them, without losing its might. This has given it a huge capability for resilience and adaptation - even going as far as incorporating in its language principles and concepts of those who fight against it.

Presently, the major difficulty in fighting the capitalist system does not stem from the extreme unbalance of military strength between those who defend it and those who fight it. The difficulty comes from two "mass cooptation weapons" that the system has taken advantage of, to establish its domination, and still uses to consolidate its position.

Consumption and propaganda

The first weapon was paradoxically built starting from of its major weaknesses: its addiction to consumption. The second weapon relied on propaganda (which, by the way, is one of the principal methods used by the gloomy fascist regimes to establish themselves). Combining these two weapons makes up the fact that the principal instrument of the capitalist system does not lie in the conquest and occupation of territories, but in the deep penetration in the heads and hearts of humans through its logic and its values. Of course, its main defender installs, "in case", numerous military bases throughout the world, but, the real control of the dominated zones comes from the combined use of these weapons of "massive cooptation".

A capitalist globalization, voracious, oppressive and unifying has set in

For an economy of needs

L.-J. Lebreton and G. Celestin

In issue no. 84 of the journal « Économie et Humanisme », published in 1954, L.-J. Lebreton and G. Celestin explained their understanding of an economy based on needs.

An ordered economy of needs, where a supply of goods, as wide-spread as possible, would be shared according to the urgency of needs for all, and not according to the hierarchy of the capacity to pay, must be modeled according to the need it precisely aims to satisfy. [...] The law of supply and demand would only be acceptable if the demand reflected accurately the need. In fact the demand corresponds only to the needs that can be paid for, and not to the real needs, responding to the formula "to each according to his means". In this way, this law is below the demands of humanity, at its present point of consciousness and aspirations.

One has therefore to see how the economy could be modeled according to the needs; needs of subsistence or essentials, whose satisfaction conditions the life of people and the creation of goods responding to the other categories of needs; needs for comfort, whose satisfaction contributes to rendering a more pleasant human existence, but whose over-estimation can lead to a disordered search for luxury or ease; transcendental needs, corresponding to the superior values of civilization.

Thus, a double hierarchy of needs is called for in the practical order of urgent priorities (*primum vivere*) and in the moral order of the scale of values (to live more and more humanely). The human economy poses necessarily the ethical problem of the end and values, and the practical problem of means and techniques; it poses also, at collective level, the cultural and political problem both of the choice between the needs and the means to satisfy them.

Complete article available on www.lebreton-irfed.org

Participation in the World Social Forum

The WSF was launched in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, at the initiative of Chico Whitaker among others. The Lebret-IrfeD Centre organized a workshop in 2004 in Mumbai on the theme "Spiritualities and identities, and the dialogue of civilizations". Several members of the Lebret international network have participated in the various forums. In 2011, at Dakar (from February 6 to 11), we will co-organize, particularly with ENDA and other African organizations two workshops: one on "Ethics, Religion and Social Change" and another on "Governance and active citizenship". This will also be the occasion to strengthen our network in Africa around our platform for promoting human and solidarity-based development.

Send your questions and suggestions to:
debat.FSM.2011@lebret-irfed.org

Would it not be possible to continue on the path we are following, while correcting some excesses here and there, taking a short cut or two, and adjusting our behavior if it becomes somewhat unbalanced? Are reforms not there to change what has to be changed, while at the same time avoiding the loss of our bearings? Are entrepreneurs – as agents par excellence of capitalist expansion – not creating the necessary requirements so that their colleagues are not pushed to social irresponsibility? Most of them view these requirements as a chance to improve their image – no one favours being looked upon as a savage – and to sell more. And is the increase in consumption not in everyone's interest?

A new concept has emerged: that of sustainability. This was created at a time when one started to say that the resources of Mother Earth were finite, and that the unbridled consumption of goods and energy, spurred by capitalism, may lead to the exhaustion of our planet.

Later, an even more distressing possibility was envisaged: we shall go to the destruction of planet earth if we continue to forge ahead in this way, and if more and more countries and peoples want to attain the living standards of the richest.

Entrepreneurs and the governments that sustain them, and are sustained by them, have then seized this new concept in order to modify public and private policies so as to avoid the risks announced. Sustainability was then transformed as per a magic trick, to provide a solution to all our troubles, as it can indeed be used in many ways. As we have the medicine, although for many it only serves to the proper continuation of business, why don't we go on in this way?

Fighting remains indispensable

The problem is that there are still many people who have not renounced the fight against capitalism, for a number of reasons, some religious. Why are these people so insistent? Would capitalism then be so reprehensible, and so dangerous? Maybe it would be wise to think quietly on the issue.

Many things around make us doubt. But what convinces me primarily as to the need to surpass the capitalist system, is its intrinsic logic founded on the system of private property. Accordingly, the objective of any economic activity is to make profit – all the time, and as much as possible, and

Commentary

The optimism of the heart

Social, political, economic crisis; rise of nationalisms and extreme-right parties in many countries; search for scapegoats, generally the migrants; more exclusion, less solidarity...

The years to come certainly do not lead to much happy optimism. Nevertheless, here and there, new experiences occur, mobilizations appear, some struggles gather momentum, and above all, Indian men and women, who were rejected, stigmatized, in the past are at long last now recognized as humans. Sparks of hope in an increasingly grey world -- the main thread to continue our dream? Yes, let us dream a bit, let us tie-up again with mobilising utopias. And as the poet Paul Valery, would say: "To reason's pessimism, let us oppose our heart's optimism".

But the path that leads from dream to reality is steep, with its ups and downs, its mobilizations and counter-mobilizations. It is not only the way shown by Reason, but also by the relationships of forces. It will not only mean to convince people about the negative aspects of consumerism, and to going against propaganda as mentioned by Chico. One must also be prepared to confront the counter-attacks of the "adorers of the golden calf" when their privileges are threatened. With all the risks this entails particularly and especially that of resembling one's adversary in the long term, as one may have observed with so-called socialist experiences in the recent past.

What then? Two adversaries: them and... us. "Overcoming capitalism" is decidedly not "a long quiet river". One must know this and be made known, to resist the nightmares produced by a capitalism in crisis, and move towards a society that is more just, with greater solidarity, where men and women are not alienated nor treated as objects and where they can take up their destiny in their own hands.

Pierre Salama

*University Professor Emeritus,
economist,
Latin-America expert*

pierre.salama@univ-paris13.fr

What about Brazil? What can be said of the use in our country of the weapons of consumerism and propaganda?

The scare of communism has been easily associated with simply the scare of socialism – even when one adds the "democratic" adjective. This is what the Workers' Party² did in its beginnings in order not to pollute its message with the mistakes made by the Soviets. Thanks to fifty years of propaganda, communists and socialists are, even today, considered as ferocious beings that kill and devour children.

As far as consumerism is concerned – an essential ingredient for the capitalist economy's growth – we are totally infected. Publicity makes unlimited use of modern mass communication media and has thereby rendered our middle-class consumerist to the hilt, just as its counterparts throughout the world. Our middle-class is more than happy with its commercial centers – they are pleasant, safe, aesthetic – sometimes even stately – and they grow like mushrooms throughout Brazil.

Change – this enemy

The question therefore is: if that is the environment we live in, why change it? "One does not change a winning team" – as our numerous football commentators say. The bad image shown by socialists and their friends only harm themselves. Maybe this image helps those parties that want to "ensure progress with order"³, win the elections. And if we can and are willing to consume ever more, so good! Why should we overtake capitalism? Even the most oppressed of our people would not understand the sense or the necessity of this proposal.

not to answer human needs. In fact answering the needs of mankind is nothing more than an excuse to make profits.

From a consumer's point of view, we cannot access the goods and services we need unless we have the money to buy them: food, education, information, water, health, habitat, land, transport, leisure and so on. We therefore have no other option but permanently to strive for money.

As, following the capitalist logic, everything can be changed into goods to be sold to obtain the indispensable money, many take advantage of the situation to gather huge wealth. Let's take as example knowledge and the intellectual property rights attached: patents forbid drugs that are already well established from being produced and taken to those who do not have the means to buy them. In the same way, forests that should be preserved to rebuild environmental balances are destroyed because of the commercial value of timber.

Deconstructing preconceived ideas

Everything considered, It appears evident to me that to build "the other possible world" which we yearn for, the greatest hurdle we face, we Brazilians and all others, is clearly the logic that governs economic activities worldwide. It is a tough fight. It is not by shouting "Socialism!" in all directions that we will be listened to; even less by unfolding the revolutionary flag, which ignites a strong sentiment of fear.

A hard task lies in front of us to inform in order to deconstruct the pre-

conceived ideas that have been created by over fifty years of propaganda, and to invert the habits nurtured by consumerism. We should march towards an era of post-capitalism whose contours should rapidly be drawn.

What a surprise it is to hear that in some places there is an increasing talk of aiming at degrowth rather than growth! It is indeed astonishing to see that consumer power is being efficiently used to block the system's absurdities! Imagine those who denounce consumerism and propose voluntarily themselves to adopt simplified ways of life. Some studies show that in the more affluent countries, a significant number of people already go for ways of life that are different from those of the majority. In those countries environmental problems rally more and more people. This opens up an

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opportunity to denounce the capitalist logic that exacerbates irresponsible consumption, and consequently waste. Others even try to cut the giant's feet. They follow the paths opened by social economy and question the present status of money as the centre and final objective of each person. They invent new types of currency to re-establish the basic functions of money, that should remain a simple tool.

These true fighters are only a minority of course, but their number does not stop growing as awareness grows that no David will have a sling sufficiently precise to bring down the giant in a single shot. A new image can now be seen, and it is better tailored to what we should be doing. It proposes to indefinitely multiply swarms of bees

that attack the monster without respite, on all sides⁴.

Is there place for hope? In the rich countries, the basic needs of the majority have been satisfied, and consumerism, stimulated by the capitalist system pushes people towards the individual and the endless satisfaction of needs for comfort. It is more important 'to have' than 'to be'. As Brazilians, we should not aspire to enter the First World. We could very well stay in the Third World, with our mode of living and our shortcomings, but should go a step further: from satisfying individual basic needs to that of transcendental needs⁵. Let us put on the top of our scale values of cooperation rather than of competition – this engine of the capitalist system that divides human beings and turns them into enemies.

If you allow me to dream a little, I would like to sit down at a street corner and stay there imagining the day when, in our universities and political circles, in our movements and associations, in our churches and citizens' communities, we will be able to hold lively discussions around these experiences, new values and totally different living perspectives.

Chico Whitaker
Translation by Jacques Weerts

We are publishing here excerpts from the second part of the article entitled "Se me permitem sonhar". The complete original paper, in Portuguese, can be found on Chico Whitaker's web-site and on a blog specially created to records reactions to this paper.

www.chicowhitaker.net
senospermittedsonhar.wordpress.com

¹ *Populorum Progressio* Encyclical. Unfortunately at the time, feminist movements had not yet shown that the use of the word « man » to designate both men and women, and that this contributed in a decisive way and for a very long time to the domination of one half of our society by the other...

² Party of Lula and Dilma Rouseff, presently in power in Brazil.

³ Referring to the Brazilian national motto: « Ordem e Progresso ».

⁴ Image created by "Turbulences", a magazine known to alterglobalist circles.

⁵ See the boxed text : *For an economy based on needs* by L.-J. Lebreton, G. Celestin.

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