

## OUR CHILDREN: MAY GOD PROTECT THEM

*Gilberto Dimenstein is a political reporter for the Folha de Sao Paulo, a respected daily newspaper. In 1989, he took a leave of absence to research a book on street children, exchanging, in his words, "the notables for the notorious, the famous for the anonymous, the world for the underworld."*

*The article translated and excerpted here was printed in a magazine for journalists, Imprensa, in January 1992. Dimenstein reminds his readers that "politics" is not limited to the corridors of power in the capital city of Brasilia, "where journalists often become so used to wheeling and dealing that they begin to see as normal that which is strictly outside the norm." Instead, he persuasively argues that the process that created the street children and their killers is eminently political and must be put on the front burner of Brazil's concerns.*

...There, on the streets, where the clash is between the street kid and his murderer or torturer, is where power is being exercised — not just in the presidential palace, the Cabinet room, or the halls of Congress. The possible re-election [or impeachment] of Fernando Collor is just one aspect of the power mill. A mill where an eclectic mix of ingredients is thrown together—such as the impact of the recession in the United States on developing countries, agreements with the IMF, the impact of military expenses in world investments, the capacity of Eastern Europe to absorb capital being withdrawn from Latin America....

When we discover that every day children are being assassinated and that [many] of the murders are perpetrated by death squads that enjoy impunity from the law, we have a terribly perfect picture of how the society decides who's in control. And who must obey. Who should be protected and who should be marginalized. Who has rights and who has no rights at all. The increasing banalization of human life in Brazil is the picture that comes into focus when we begin to put together the puzzle pieces of power relations.

**Systematic massacres** — Violence against street children symbolizes the synthesis of Brazil's political history. It is impossible to disassociate this phenomenon from the fact that we were the last independent country to abolish slavery. Or that our upper class continues to believe that social problems should be dealt with by the police.

To comprehend Brazil's ideology we must take into account the fact that the country was exploited rather than colonized, like the United States. And that the ruling elites always bowed to all forms of colonialism, imagining that everything from outside the country must be better.

Inevitably, from this point of view, a disdain for "the people" emerged. This cultural root is so strong, so very strong, that even the so-called progressive and enlightened elites fall into the trap of omission when they are faced with the murders of street children — most of them, by the way, black, like their slave ancestors.

Only thus, through a cultural lens, is it possible to understand how our liberals and democrats, who were so honestly distressed by the military dictatorship, so angry about torture of political prisoners and press censorship, and so unhappy in exile, have forgotten about human rights.

Let's be honest. The military regime is over, a civilian government is in power, but we all know that ordinary prisoners are still being tortured in police stations and jails. We know that illegal imprisonment persists. We all know that the military police exterminate delinquents, or alleged delinquents. We also know that the death penalty exists and is being ap-

plied daily to guarantee property rights. Ever since the magnificent film "Pixote," by Hector Babenco, nobody has the right to be unaware of the existence of systematic massacres of poor and abandoned children and adolescents.

**Political brutality** — The stories we have heard about torture of boys and girls can be compared to Nazi concentration camps. There are stories just as horrendous as those told during the terrible days of Brazil's own military dictatorship. With one difference: the political prisoner, even if he disagreed, knew why he was in jail. And, outside the prison gates there were people fighting for him, denouncing his imprisonment. The street kids don't have any idea why they are being jailed. They suppose that they are guilty of their own social marginalization and, as a result, don't deserve any solidarity.

How can it be explained, for example, that Brazil has 350 million cultivable hectares of land of which only 14% are producing? The result is that today there are 80 million Brazilians with an energy deficit, consuming less than the minimum of 2,440 calories necessary to the body. Or that despite technological advances, the country has learned to export airplanes but doesn't know how to build a literate population. Of every eight voters, 6.8 are illiterate.

**Grim Statistics** — People are only free when they can make choices. And they can only make choices when there is more than one alternative. For this, it is necessary to have information. The press in a country of illiterates is and will always be an elite press, incapable of fulfilling its basic mission of providing the freedom to choose and the right to be informed. The tragedy of today's children is that their generation will certainly never be readers, much less university students, or even second graders.

The health of democracy can be measured by some data gathered by the IBGE [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] with the support of UNICEF.... Today, 50.5% of Brazilian children and adolescents live in families with monthly incomes of less than half a minimum salary, or \$25 per family member. Of this total, 27.4% live in families where the income is just \$12 apiece per month (the equivalent of four hamburgers and a Coke). In the Northeast, this number increases to 49.4%. We are talking of about 20 million kids who live on the poverty line, whose future has probably already been sealed — if for no other reason, because of the brain damage wreaked by malnutrition.

It is difficult to find anything more absurd than the coexistence of 350 million acres of cultivable land and 80 million people suffering from insufficient caloric intake. Every day thousands of children die before reaching the age of one — most of the deaths are linked, obviously, to lack of food. Malnutrition affects five million children under the age of seven. Those who look upon this as a "northeastern problem" are fooling themselves: the cities are ringed by a belt of grim statistics. In the city of Pirapora do Bom Jesus, outside of Sao Paulo, the infant mortality rate has reached 157 per 1,000 — about the same as Bangladesh and Sierra Leone, the poorest countries in the world according to U.N. data.

Around 25% of Brazilians under 25 years of age are considered to be dwarfs. This is not a genetic problem, it is a result of malnutrition. Only a miracle can turn an undernourished child into a good student. Even if the child has the will to succeed, the schools are terrible, the teachers badly paid. It's not for nothing that of every 100 students only 13 finish second grade. Millions of boys and girls only go to school to eat the snack.

**Manipulating ignorance** — There is no better example of the attitude of Brazil's elites than their treatment of public education. No country in the world has taken the big step toward development with an uneducated population. Countries that turn basic education

into a national obsession, like Japan and Germany, not to speak of other "Asian tigers," have shown their results in world technology markets. In the U.S. and Japan, about 4% of GNP is invested in research, half of which comes from private enterprise. It is normal for businessmen to help universities or donate their wealth to research institutes. In Brazil, just 1% of GNP is so invested — and that represents ten times less than the U.S. investment. About 90% of these funds come from the state; only a mere 10% from the private sector.

The destruction of public education is part of a national schema, a schema in which involving the masses in the productive process and in the web of citizenship has never been, and still is not, a priority. Citizenship is not forged on election day, but rather in school.

It is only natural that people who have built their careers on manipulating ignorance are afraid. From the Discovery, through the Empire, and into the Republic there is a common thread in Brazil's history: the separation between the representative elites and the majority of the population. Changes are made only at the top, involving small cliques. Today's political parties reflect this lack of popular roots. Politicians change parties as often as they change shirts. Parties come and go; no one misses them.

The result of this lack of commitment to the overall society is clearly revealed in the *Human Development Report* published annually by the United Nations. This study analyzes the key social indicators of all countries in order to compare standards of living. Per capita income, illiteracy, average years of education of each citizen, infant mortality, and life expectancy for each country are put forward. In this document, Brazil appears to be a super-privileged country when total wealth is measured. But it falls into 60th place when the real quality of life is evaluated. Well below countries such as Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina; countries where economic growth rates haven't even come close to those experienced by Brazil during this century, especially in the post World War II period, when growth averaged 7% annually.

**Policemen and Bad Guys** — The most recent figures published by the IBGE reveal that in Brazil 1% of the population receives 14.6% of the country's income. The poorest 10% receive a mere 0.8%. But concentration of wealth is not enough to explain the misery of the mass of the population. There is another key piece of data: about 75% of all workers receive wages of \$150 or less per month. Yet, the drama of the abandoned child and the professional killers goes beyond the issue of salaries.

In 1940, the Brazilian population was 41 million people. Today it is estimated at 148 million. This rapid growth was a tragedy: the modernization of agriculture resulted in the expulsion of about 30 million people from the countryside between 1960 and 1980.... As a result, the ten biggest urban centers absorbed 42% of Brazil's demographic growth during the 1970s.

In Brazil, rapid population growth, the large-scale exodus from the countryside, the economy's inability to absorb new workers, and the highly uneven distribution of land and income began adding up. The *favelas* mushroomed. But we shall only understand the street children phenomenon when we add to all these factors the recession of the 1980s, when no new jobs were created and buying power spiraled downward. Private and public investment shrank. Result: undeclared civil war.

The same job with a lower salary is synonymous with socio-economic marginalization. Due to political pressures, the civil and military police are concentrated in the wealthiest areas. The poor neighborhoods and the cities on the periphery of major urban centers are being taken over by crime waves as a result of the lack of security forces. Police stations lack equipment, investigations are left uncompleted — signs of complicity between the police and the criminals. In 1989 alone, according to Health Ministry data, there were close to

50,000 homicides in Brazil — almost equal to the number of American soldiers who died during the Vietnam War. It's every man for himself. By any means necessary.

**A Social Role** — Faced with the lack of security, the community, particularly businessmen, have taken "justice" into their own hands, contracting death squads. During my research I was able to observe how popular, respected, and beloved the killers are; how they are seen as protectors. The population cannot or will not imagine that with the power and prestige they have acquired, the death squads are also involved in such organized crime as drug trafficking, car theft, and bank robbery. When a body is found on the street, no one can know with certainty whether these "protectors" have killed a "criminal" to defend the community or as part their own gang wars.

I confirmed that, along with community members, the police also know who the killers are, but they prefer to wash their hands for several reasons. In the first place, because the death squads are performing an "auxiliary" service, permitting the police to avoid direct confrontations with the so-called criminals. Secondly, because many of the police are paid killers in their spare time, work taken on to increase their earnings. Thirdly, communities not only fail to demand police intervention, they actively support the death squads. And finally, because they don't have the community support, the authorities are simply not tough enough to catch the killers.

In off-the-record conversations, the police chiefs are frank and are not the least bit impressed by whether the person who was assassinated is seven, eight, nine, or 12 years old. It is worth noting that during the 1970s, there were no children among the victims of the death squads; this underlines the extent to which the economic crisis has pushed the children into the streets and the criminal milieu. Police chiefs and killers all take the same line—a criminal is a criminal, no matter what age. They do not believe that a juvenile delinquent can ever be rehabilitated, since they have seen so many of the same people move in and out of jail. They think that instituting the death sentence would play a positive "social role." In the nation's police stations, the motto is "a good criminal is a dead criminal."

**Where Are We Headed?** — But things are improving, people say. Slowly we are shaking off our inertia. We are beginning to react, from the federal Congress and state assemblies, to investigations begun by the National Lawyer's Association, and even the federal government—in part due to its concern over its image abroad.

Outside Brazil, expressions of shock and perplexity have increased constantly as news about the assassination of children spreads. It has become an obligatory story for foreign journalists. And perhaps the perceptions of foreigners are even clearer than our own: they cannot accept the absence of a State of Law, taken to its ultimate consequences.

When we discuss the issue of assassination of children, what we are really talking about is how and why Brazil has only achieved democracy at the formal level, since individual freedoms are still far from being assured. And, as a result, we are also touching upon the question of why large sectors of the population accept without question the idea that those who have been marginalized by society must pay for it with their lives. The barbarism of our large urban centers is today's most relevant political fact. It is not easy to explain to the ordinary citizen that the street kids are a product meticulously designed on the drawing board of social neglect.

It is time for opinion makers to understand that politics is more than the buzzing in the hallways of power, but is also, and mainly, the hopelessness stamped on the face of the abandoned child. If it is difficult to sensitize the media to this fact, imagine the insecure middle class, terrified by the violence. Or the poor who, no less secure, have concluded that killing is the best way to protect their own lives.