



CITIZENSHIP

Equity and Public Action p. 32

BrazilFoundation p. 37

Becoming Brazuca p.42

Equality for Same-Sex Couples p.46

The Images of Favelas p. 49

Understanding the São Paulo Attacks p. 52

Equity and Public Action

Facing the Challenge of Brazil's Inequality

BY PETER K. SPINK

IN HIS CLASSICAL TEXT ON CITIZENSHIP IN THE ERA OF THE welfare state and the coming together in the 1950s of the three strands of civil, political and social rights, British sociologist T.H. Marshall argued that modern democracy is held together by a delicate balance through which people are prepared to tolerate a certain degree of economic inequality. Within limits, they will accept that earnings can vary provided that in other areas of collective endeavor, equality—increasingly expressed in terms of rights—will be the overriding premise.

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly clear in many countries that things are not that simple. The hoped-for delicate balance is being undermined by the chaotic oscillations of exaggerated financial liberty, poverty and ineffectively distributed services. The result has been the growing use in the arena of public action of a principle that has been around for many centuries in legal philosophy: equity. Equity, the quality of being fair or just, is what we expect from judges; it is why we talk about leveling the playing field, of giving some people an advantage so as to counterbalance any disadvantage they may have and it is what leads us to affirmative action, the recognition that equality alone is not enough—that being fair is much more than giving everybody the same chance.

In the field of public administration, the racial conflicts in the United States in the 1960s led scholar H. George Frederickson to argue the need to include social equity—responsiveness to the needs of citizens—as the needed new rule for service provision. As he well put it: “To say that a service may be well managed and that a service may be efficient and economical still begs these questions: Well managed for whom? Efficient for whom? Economical for whom?” (*The New Public Administration*, University of Alabama



One way Brazilians express their citizenship is through street demonstrations. Depicted here is a recent demonstration in São Paulo.

Press, 1980). For the administrator who sees the advantage of using the banking system to provide easy access to benefits, a plastic card approach to welfare seems like a good idea; but if the recipient lives somewhere where there is no bank, the result may be very different. Recently, a woman colleague spent the night talking with people in line waiting for a trade union and local government-supported job center to open at 7 a.m. One girl broke into tears when describing how she had to borrow some flour, milk and sugar from friends, make a cake which she sold by the slice, in order to get the money to pay for the bus ticket to the center plus some more bus tickets to use if she managed a job interview.

Nobody would doubt that questions of poverty and inequality are identity marks for most of Latin America and that the continent in general—and Brazil specifically—has not had much success at changing the overall picture. The increased use of income supplement grants has provided some relief. However, the many analyses that have been made of programs, such as Brazil's family grant scheme, show that while necessary to guarantee minimum food requirements, these programs are not likely to break the poverty cycle. Nor will the conditionalities attached to such programs—for example, for children to attend school or parents to go for job training—produce any lasting effects, given the overall low quality of schooling and the general lack of work opportunities.

What is needed is a more expanded approach to poverty, that considers not only the economic means of sustaining a viable livelihood, but the many different aspects that sustain the households and communities to which the livelihood is related. Everyday life is not a homogeneous experience nor is constructing and maintaining a viable livelihood, or being part of a household and a community. As we unpack the statistics and look at the differences in terms of gender, location, ethnicity and many other factors, we see that poverty is a heterogeneous process, produced and reproduced in many everyday actions.

In unequal settings, it is necessary to be highly skeptical of averages. For example, to discuss average annual income is one thing in a country where everybody gets the same, and something else in a country where a few are very wealthy and many are poor. Brazil is one of these. In terms of income, the wealthiest ten percent have nearly 50 percent of all the income while the poorest ten percent have only one percent. In certain parts of the country, such as the northeastern semi-arid areas, this difference will be even more



extreme. A minimum wage—the maximum that many workers will get—is about one seventieth of the salary received by many judges, business executives and national congress members. Unemployment figures are higher for Afro-descendants than for Euro-descendants and for women than for men; black women face a double exclusion. Salary levels follow a similar negative distribution.

Overall averages for illiteracy show a decline over recent years. However, once functional illiteracy is taken into consideration and the averages are opened up, we find that about 83 percent of adults over 15 years old in rural areas have had only four years of schooling or less. As a result, they have great difficulty in dealing with documents and bureaucratic procedures or reading newspapers. In the country as a whole, 3.6 million people (2 percent) are without basic documents such as birth certificates and identity cards, necessary for welfare benefits and access to the judicial system. This figure can rise to over 40 percent among *quilombo* dwellers (the former fugitive slave hideaways). The usual reason given is that the *quilombos* are located in out of the way areas of the country; that may have been true at the beginning of the 19th century, but by now the rest of the country has grown up around them. In the federal government's search to register families for the family support grant, teams recently found one such grouping without any documents in the rural zone of a medium-sized town close to Porto Alegre, the state capital of Rio Grande do Sul.

In terms of health, the challenge facing the country's unified health service is no better. Despite constantly falling overall infant mortality rates, these numbers will still range between 16 per thousand among the 20 percent wealthiest in the southeast to 111 per thousand among the 20 percent poorest in the northeast. In the country as a whole, infant mortality is three times less when the mother has eight years or more of schooling than when the mother has studied less than four years.

Unpacking statistics is not that difficult. Community health agents have learned to draw maps of the community to pinpoint certain vulnerabilities. The Catholic Church's infant support program (*Pastoral da Criança*) gathers data on a weekly and monthly basis to monitor trends among more than a million new born infants, using a register that was largely designed by their volunteer field workers. The Recife municipal government, along with the Federal University of Pernambuco and the United Nations Development Programme, has broken down the Human Development Indicator (HDI) on a block-by-block level, replacing the gray averages with the sharp contrasts that will enable policy makers to act affirmatively. The mayor of Boa Vista in Roraima did the same



with social statistics, opening them up house by house and discussing the implications for policy priorities with the community.

Equity is a very slippery notion, holding the center ground in a rope-pulling competition between minimalist liberals, who think it should all be left to individual freedom, and communitarians who argue for social dignity and collective rights. The recent thirty years of the U.S. Supreme Court have shown what a complicated balancing act equity and affirmative action can be, and there are as many critics of John Rawls' more detailed arguments on equity as a logical regime as there are followers.

Equity is a doubly difficult notion in Brazil, both because of

the country's strongly coded legal framework and because, like other Latin languages, the word for rights and the word for laws is the same (*o direito*—the law; *os direitos*—the rights). However the language of rights is spilling out of the legal textbooks and finding its way onto the street, as was seen in the period leading up to the 1988 constitution and the intense social mobilization around health rights, which was sufficient to invert the marked tendency to privatization and give Brazil its current unified health service. Equity may be difficult but—and this is what is most important—it offers a starting point for a different approach to policy. As a left-wing student in the highly charged atmosphere of a graduate seminar on

THE BLACK MOVEMENT: REVISING THE STORY

This summer I traveled to Brazil for a major international gathering of scholars, political leaders, poets, and students at *A Conferência de Intelectuais da África e da Diáspora* (The Conferences of Intellectuals from Africa and the Diaspora) in Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia in the northeastern region of Brazil. *A Tarde*, a popular Bahian newspaper, called the event “o mais importante evento de e para a comunidade negra brasileira ocorrido nos últimos anos [the most important event by and for the black Brazilian community in recent years].”

Only minutes from my hotel window, members of the *Movimento Negro* (Black Movement) raised placards that read “COTAS RACIAIS JÁ.” (*Racial Quotas Now*), chanting “Contra as cotas, só racista” (Only the racist is against quotas). They demonstrated in support of quotas that would guarantee increased access to Brazilian institutions of higher education for Brazilians of African descent. For the *Movimento Negro*, the conference represented an unprecedented commitment to the pursuit of racial equality and they took advantage of the chance to bolster politi-

cal support for an increasingly controversial cause.

The scene felt like stories my parents and grandparents had told me about picket signs, marches, sit-ins, and Freedom Riders. I realized I was looking into the face of imminent change in Brazil. And, just as it had been for the United States, a change that had much to do with the politics and problems of race. The fact of race and racial discrimination in Brazil was now receiving national attention, a fact that challenged the popular idea that Brazil was a “racial democracy,” as Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre had claimed in the early thirties. As a literary scholar I would have to think about the way literature fit into this change.

The final day of the conference featured a panel called “*Vertentes Contemporâneas nas Literaturas Africanas e Diáspóricas*” (Contemporary Developments in African and Diasporic Literatures). Afro-Brazilian poets Esmeralda Ribeiro and Conceição Evarista and others read their work, speaking of slavery and continents, dreams and poetry. I realized more than ever before that my doctoral research in

the area of Afro-Brazilian literature would have to consider this tension between a legacy of slavery and a loyalty to the idea of a Brazilian racial paradise. It would have to recognize the challenges to and revisions of the racial, cultural, and literary history of Brazil.

As it grew out of and contributed to this change, the poetry of many Afro-Brazilian poets at once questioned and revised the story that had dominated Brazilian scholarship and literature since the nineteenth century. They called attention to a history of racialized marginalization. At the same time, these poets used their words to legitimize the place of African descendants in a Brazilian nation. In short, they wrote to rewrite history. My responsibility, then, would be to reread it.

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BRAZIL

poverty and inequality remarked: “As a concept, it’s full of flaws, but it is much better than what we’ve got.”

If we can accept the need to act affirmatively, there are a number of examples at the local level that can help. The Public Management and Citizenship Program was set up in 1996 as a joint initiative of the Fundação Getulio Vargas in São Paulo and the Ford Foundation, drawing on earlier experiences at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Its aim is to identify, analyze and disseminate innovative practices amongst sub-national Brazilian governments (states, municipalities and indigenous peoples’ tribal governments) that have a positive impact on strengthening citizenship and on the quality of life. It focuses on experiences—policies, programs, projects or activities—that innovate in service provision, can be reproduced in other localities, utilize resources and opportunities in a responsible manner and extend the dialogue between civil society and public agents. Among the more than 8,000 registered experiences, there are numerous examples of an intuitive approach to being fair in everyday service provision.

Evaluations of the widely known participative budgeting approach to local government investment decisions have shown that local re-distribution of policy priorities and resources is possible. Inter-municipal cooperation in the north of Brazil has changed food supply patterns and created new market opportunities for family farmers by stimulating production of vegetables, flowers, fruit, dairy and livestock for local and export consumption. In doing so, agricultural research agencies have been persuaded to switch their focus from the problems of the large scale single crop

producers, to the multiple crops of local ecologies. In the Belo Horizonte metropolitan region, the organizing efforts of the independent associations of street recyclers of paper, glass, plastic and aluminum cans (*catadores*), along with the Catholic Church, local authorities, the Banco de Brasil and other businesses, have led to the associations finally owning their own reprocessing factory.

However, it is a very difficult and uphill struggle on a very unlevel playing field. Equity helps us to focus on the problems to be solved, but also makes visible those features of everyday life that are preventing them from being solved. Bringing small-scale producers into the food producing chain has required learning how to develop micro-factories that meet food processing standards, and how to cooperate in purchasing packaging material, creating brand names and stamping the bar codes that supermarkets require, only to fail at the tilted negotiating table of the huge supermarket chains. Brazil’s top business schools are well supplied with specialists in logistics and the country’s consultancy firms are as up-to-date as elsewhere on the continent. But at the same time, hundreds of thousands of small micro-producers in urban and rural areas, including street sellers and neighborhood shops and services, which together form an immense and invisible *nano-economy*, cannot get past first base in economic integration.

Businesses may be ready to join in on responsibility issues, usually on photogenic questions such as children and the environment, but will not lend their key executives to try to sort out how micro-enterprises can cluster and strengthen themselves, or show interest in how more balanced supply chains can be developed through

action on all sides, or even introduce a bit more fairness in trade relations. Banks are great funders on a number of social issues, yet Brazil is only able to meet two percent of the current estimated demand for micro-credit loans. Its active micro-credit client base (that is, those receiving loans) is only 158,654 clients, a long way behind Bolivia which is only a twentieth of the size of Brazil yet has 379,117 active micro-credit clients.

There are signs of hope. Optimistically, we could say that—compared to twenty years ago—an increasing number of local governments in Brazil are intuitively, if not explicitly, bringing equity into policy making. But if we don’t also pay attention to the problems that have been preventing us from working on the issues at hand, we will find ourselves back where we began. As the saying goes: if we are not part of the solution, we are probably also part of the problem.

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São Paulo’s Hilton hotel and Microsoft’s Brazil headquarters in the modern Berrini business district, with neighboring favela (foreground).