

# A fling with deep democracy

By Siddhartha

When I recently met Andre Porto, a young Brazilian activist-cum-astrologer, he told me that the civil society movement in Rio de Janeiro was alive and kicking. As one of the leaders of the Viva Rio movement, meant to mobilise the public against day-to-day-violence in Rio, Andre was successfully campaigning for police reforms. “ In a year or so we will have new laws on the functioning of the police,” he said. His words touched me profoundly, for they signified that Herbert de Souza’s ideas and efforts were still at work two years after his death.

To millions of his countrymen Herbert de Souza was known as Betinho. I had known him slightly; on one occasion we had spent a couple of hours discussing the crisis of democratic institutions. When he died he had attained the status of a national cult figure and had been nominated for the Nobel Prize for his crusade against hunger. Physically Betinho was a most unlikely candidate for all this attention. He was fragile and small, bent with illness; powerless, one would assume. There was an elfin quaintness about him. The stigma of Aids escaped him because he had contracted the virus through blood transfusions which, as a hemophilic, he was periodically in need of. Betinho himself was aware of his frail and diminutive figure. He once told me, “ As a result of the media build-up people come to see me. But I don’t know what they see!”

To appreciate the significance of Betinho and the Civil Society processes he symbolized I must briefly comment on the course of alternative political movements in the recent past. Many of us who have spent the last twenty-five years in reflecting and acting upon social issues find ourselves in a new context where we are beset by the torrential forces which go by the name of globalization. Where do we stand today? Or if ‘standing’ is impossible what do we ‘lean’ on? How can we proceed when our social and intellectual practices have come unstuck? Have the years of effort gone up in smoke and is there much to show after fifty years of independence?

It was becoming clear that while both the Left and the Right differed about the manner of economic distribution they were still talking about producing the same cake. More than that, the cake in question had begun to pose another kind of dilemma. It was discovered that not only would the cake be permanently insufficient to go around but the very act of making the cake was dealing a mortal blow to the Earth’s life support systems. At a different level the early delusion that we might be moving into a multipolar world was soon dispelled. It was abundantly clear who was calling the shots. We were trapped by the make-believe of Pax Americana. The deterrence of the bipolar was replaced by the arrogance of the unipolar. Along with this we now have pervasive globalization and a looming civilizational crisis. Utopias, even as myths to fancy a better world, have few takers and the preoccupation with alternative perspectives and modes of consciousness is at an all time low.

At this point of time Betinho began to articulate new and original insights that came to be associated with the understandings around Civil Society. Time-wise, Brazil appeared to be ideally placed for these ideas to bear fruit. Having recently emerged from a prolonged period of dictatorship it soon found itself in the process of impeaching its democratically elected leader, President Collor, on serious charges of corruption. Thousands of groups spontaneously sprang up all over the country to discuss the impeachment and demand the removal of the President. This was unprecedented in the country's recent history. Soon, other issues and campaigns began to mushroom. The best known among them, the Campaign against Hunger, emerged because millions of Brazilians went hungry each day in a wealthy country. For Betinho this was an unpardonable scandal. His voice carried a quiet intensity when he told me: "The big question is to know what social self-defense means. This is complex. If people are starving, then stealing is legitimate."

These campaigns covered not only issues pertaining to Hunger, but Ethics and Violence as well. About one third of the Brazilian population participated in these campaigns. Betinho stated: "Each one of us has to offer something. Every citizen must act. Nobody need tell us what to do or how to act. We have to find out for ourselves. We must act right now and act without hierarchy. It is our action, as citizens, which will regenerate Democracy. Institutions cannot do this. Believe in yourself rather than in government, political parties or bureaucrats." For a few from the old left his words came as a surprise. They had known Betinho as the strident marxist-leninist who had spent nine years in exile. He was now beginning to come across as a soft reformer. But Betinho had moved into these new directions only after careful reflection and a shrewd analysis of what was possible and what was not. For him the days of dogmatism and sectarianism were over. If serious problems had to be addressed successfully everybody had to participate - transcending class, ethnicity and colour.

Another significant movement was the Viva Rio Campaign. It was launched in September 1993 as a response to the escalating violence in Rio de Janeiro. The preceding months had seen punk groups from the slums terrorizing sun-bathers on Ipanema beach, street children killed because they were a nuisance to genteel neighbourhoods, and innocent people being shot by the police in the Vigario Geral slum. (The police were avenging the killing of policemen by slum gangs. Many of the big slums were controlled by gun toting Drug Lords). In Betinho's words: "The dynamics of violence is an endless process. You constantly reproduce the war and the warriors." On 17<sup>th</sup> December 1993, as a response to all the violence, the Viva Rio Campaign inspired hundreds of thousands of people to observe two minutes silence in the city. Momentarily, the city came to a halt from the deeply felt desire to end the spiral of violence.

These campaigns helped people to communicate with each other and find answers to problems. To this day nobody has an obvious role of leadership, which is very much in keeping with the principles of the movement. The movements are committed to enabling leadership to emerge within the groups. From the beginning these movements emphasized processes which would foster local leadership. No preconceived blueprints for action were prepared and no orders were passed down the line. People attempted to communicate and mediate at different levels and contexts so that awareness could arise, discussions take place

and actions follow. In conceptual terms it was the opposite of the notion of democratic centralism. But this did not mean that the floodgates of anarchy were loosened. There certainly were leaders like Betinho, Rubem Fernandes and a few others. Apart from Betinho all the other leaders consciously remained in the background. They did not see themselves directing the movement. To foster communication between different sections they kept a low profile but played an enabling role. Even Betinho refrained from giving directions, saying “We will not tell you what to do. You must find out for yourselves.”

Despite the many achievements of social democracy, deep democracy has a long way to go. In Bettinho’s words, “ What I earlier understood of democracy was liberal democracy. I did not have a conception of radical democracy. I now realize that democracy is not a static notion. Democracy is revolutionary and endless. It deepens as it goes along. Like the lights of a car which do not immediately reveal the destination, it reveals as it progresses.” If democracy is revolutionary and endless it leaves us with a great deal of hope. The impotency that ordinary citizens experience on a daily basis need not be a permanent ordeal. Our existing democracies can be changed from their representative and centralized nature to ones that are participatory and decentralized. The deepening of democracy will depend on the extent to which Civil Society is energized.

Despite the justified euphoria over Civil Society it should not be an excuse to let the State of the hook. The State needs to creatively interact with Civil Society processes. This is all the more important since the State is showing tendencies in many parts of the world of becoming mere appendages of transnational corporations and big powers. The State cannot be absolved of the responsibility of playing a major role in fighting poverty, protecting the environment, safeguarding the interests of minorities and upholding the rule of law. With this note of caution I would go along with Alan Wolfe when he writes: “ The crucial characteristic of Civil Society is to reverse the priorities of political economy. It is to assert that human beings and their desires can alter otherwise determinant structures. It is to open unexpected possibilities rather than to focus on the conditions that make defeat inevitable. It is to believe that not only will change happen, but that it has probably already happened even without our knowing it.”