

Education or Death

An American scholar in Brazil says the country is better than most think, but has crucial challenges to overcome

Roberto Pompeu de Toledo

Norman Gall, an American, has specialized in Latin-America as a journalist since 1961. In 1977 he settled in Brazil. Here he created the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics, based in São Paulo, whose activities embrace seminars bringing together distinguished foreigners and Brazilians. One of them was "The Education and Modernization of Spain", with the ex-head of the Spanish government, Felipe González, as well as social projects such as the Reading Circles with students from the São Paulo public school system, featured in the Essay column on the last page of this issue. Gall has just published a book, "Lula and Mephistopheles", a collection of some essays that he writes for Braudel Papers, the newspaper of the institute he leads. A New Yorker from the Bronx, born in 1933, he does not limit himself to diagnosis of Brazil's problems. He combines analysis with proposals for courses of action. Issues like violence and public schools in Brazil led to a dedication that goes beyond theory. Gall has come to feel so involved with the country that he has decided to become a Brazilian citizen.

Veja: Why did you decide to become a Brazilian?

Gall: Brazil welcomed me generously and gave me many opportunities. Today I feel a part of this community. This is where my outlook on life and my work have matured.



Veja: Would that be different in another place?

Gall: I have lived in three Latin-American countries -Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Brazil. Over a 44-year career focused on Latin America, I have worked in all of the others. Brazil has a breadth that enables many people to succeed. It also is engaged in the big issues of our time: urbanization, globalization, the environment, violence, human rights, universal education, and above all, in learning how to operate complex societies. The people are learning fast. In some aspects, Brazil is like the United States of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. In Brazil I can say what I think and not be accused of being an interfering gringo, as would happen in other countries.

Veja: We native Brazilians are not used to thinking so highly of Brazil. Could the country be better than we think?

Gall: Brazil today is much better than it was when I came here almost 30 years ago. It has a democracy that functions, despite all the difficulties. The laws work better than in the past. In the poor periphery of São Paulo it is hard to find unpaved or unlighted streets. There are many more schools, even if the teaching is poor. Homicides are decreasing. In 1999 there were 11,455 murders reported in Greater São Paulo. By last year, this number fell by nearly half. Part of this fall is due to the work of the police and government, but that is not all. Credit should be given to the consolidation of communities, to greater trust between people, to the spread of commerce. Commerce occupies a lot of space, which reduces the amount of space available for illegal activities.

Veja: You and your institute have done lots of work in the poor suburbs of São Paulo. One of the most important was in Diadema, a very violent municipality that has improved

notably. What was it that caught your interest in Diadema?

Gall: My involvement began with the episode in 1997 of the Favela Naval, a poor community where policemen were filmed beating residents and killing one of them. The film was shown on TV throughout the world, provoking anger and shame among Brazilians. I went to Diadema and interviewed people in the Favela Naval. Later, with support from the World Bank, we organized a Public Safety Forum that met monthly in the City Council chambers. I had asked the mayor how often each month he met with the local police officials. He replied that they had never spoke to each other. With the forum, we were able to bring together the police chiefs, civic leaders and local politicians.

Veja: What was the purpose of these meetings?

Gall: The purpose was to analyze specific situations and incidents as they occurred each month and to propose solutions. We did a statistical study of the local crime. We hired law students to examine records of police investigations.

Veja: Would you say that the forum was decisive in changing the situation in the city?

Gall: No. There was a combination of factors. Diadema had one of the world's highest murder rates— 140 per 100,000 inhabitants. Something had to be done. City officials, the police, community leaders all got involved in the task. The process culminated in the famous Lei Seca (Dry Law) , requiring all bars to close at 11:00 p.m. Homicide rates fell substantially.

Veja: All the same, the outskirts of Brazilian cities continue to be places of violence and hopelessness.

Gall: I look at the trends and find them positive. Brazil does not have ethnic or religious conflicts like those in France. In the poor neighborhoods of Brazil people are proud when they

manage to build a small house of their own and gradually make it larger. In Brazil, people of different origins meld into one people who speak the same language and raise the same flag.

Veja: So far you have talked about what is good in Brazil. What about it's faults?

Gall: Many of them arise from defective institutional arrangements. One of them is the rigidity of the labor laws that impede creation of jobs. Another is overspending on Social Security. Brazil spends two times more on social security than it does on education, with perverse consequences: Brazil is a young country that invests more in its old people, in its past, rather than in its future. Spending on pensions would be acceptable if it was a safety-net for the poor and redistributed income from rich to poor. But no: 61% of pensions go to the wealthiest fifth of the population. By comparison, in the United States only 26% of retirement payments go to the well-to-do.

Veja: How can that be corrected?

Gall: The basic solution, adopted in other countries, is to raise the minimum retirement age. This process has already begun in Brazil, but has encountered strong resistance. Roughly 40% of spending on pensions in Brazil go to public sector employees, benefiting only 3 million of Brazil's 26 million retirees. Forty years ago, South Korea was a much poorer country than Brazil. Today it is much richer. The Koreans spend on retirement only one-fourth of what they spend on education.

Veja: Why has public school education deteriorated?

Gall: Public institutions have been suffocated by problems of scale. There were public schools that were models of excellence in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and other cities. But they were for fewer students.

When the population began to pressure the system it responded with considerable growth, but by sacrificing quality. Education is the challenge that Brazil must resolve or its problems will be eternal. The fact that poor Brazilians complete an average of 3.4 years of school is shocking. But for me, even more shocking is that the wealthiest 20% complete only 10.3 years of school. An elite with so little education will not be able to operate a complex society.

Veja: Is there any chance that the government can confront this situation?

Gall: It's difficult to get politicians interested in education. You face the problem that the political class is impermeable between one election and another. An executive who has already completed his mission in the private sector, or a very successful businessman, could collaborate by taking on the management of schools, groups of schools, or other areas of the public sector. It would be a way of placing their experience and leadership capacity at the service of society. But, contrary to what happens in the United States, Germany, or England, this is not customary in Brazil.

Veja: Why not?

Gall: The Brazilian elite takes pride in its cordiality, but it is not very generous. Take the example of Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York City. He is a billionaire businessman who decided to join the public sector because he became obsessed with the problems of the city. He doesn't seem to have other political ambitions. To lead reform of public education, he called in a brilliant lawyer of humble origins who had managed to graduate from Harvard, Joel Klein. In other cities, retired military and business men run public schools. In Brazil this doesn't exist. Philanthropy is still in its beginning. Private sector talent has not assumed responsibility yet for

public problems. The elites don't approach a state governor and say: "I think I have something to contribute in this area. Let me take responsibility." In our Institute's seminars discussing the great questions of our day, we hear a lot of diagnosis and lamentation. But we rarely hear proposals. The elite talk a lot about our problems, but they don't offer solutions.

Veja: You have visited public schools in your research. What have you found?

Gall: The situation is bad. Schools are constantly changing principals and teachers. Teachers work so much that they don't learn the names of the students. Very often teachers do not show up and the students are left with nothing to do. It is common for teachers to stand in classrooms with their backs to the students, writing on the blackboard while the students mechanically copy what they write. This kind of behavior is considered normal! On another level, Brazil does not use correctly the resources it possesses. Brazil spends on each primary and secondary school student one-fifth of what Great Britain spends. But Brazil spends twice as much on university students as Britain does.

Veja: The difficulty in dealing with these issues evidently has to do with the political system and corruption. Is there hope for improvement in this respect, in the short term?

Gall: In an essay called "Lula and Mephistopheles" in Braudel Papers, our newspaper of research and opinion, I made a few suggestions. In Brazil the Congress has a lot of power and little responsibility. I suggested that cabinet ministers, after being nominated by the president, should be approved by the Senate. This would not only permit greater scrutiny of their professional qualities and ethical character, but also would make Congress equally responsible for appointments. The scandals of 2005 show that the system of Congressional investigations must be overhauled to produce more concrete results, without wasting so much time with useless discussion and speeches. I

also suggested that all of the political parties and candidates be required to publish their financial accounts on the internet. In this way, one party would keep an eye on the other. Each candidate could check on his rivals. Voters could watch over all of them.

Veja: You were recently in Venezuela. What did you encounter there?

Gall: Hugo Chávez now commands all governmental institutions. He controls the military apparatus, the electoral system and the means to curtail freedom of expression. But I don't believe he'll last more than two or three years. He will sink in the disorder that he inherited from past governments, which he has aggravated. Populist experiments like those of Chávez, Kirchner (without Lavagna) in Argentina, and Evo Morales in Bolivia are generally a waste of time in the historical evolution of their countries. Chávez uses oil money for gestures like the purchase of \$1 billion of Argentine government bonds, but does not invest in garbage removal in Caracas. The city is choked with filth, threatening public health. There are public hospitals without film for x-ray machines or chemicals for laboratory exams. The situation is pathetic. When I lived in Caracas I conducted extensive field research in the poor periphery of Caracas. When I returned to those places last year I found them stagnated in time. It is the contrary to the progress I see in the periphery of São Paulo.

Veja: Why isn't Latin America a priority in United States foreign policy?

Gall: This question must be put into perspective. When things heat up in Latin America, the region becomes a priority. On the other hand, Latin America is not even a priority for Latin Americans. A Brazilian has no idea what is going on in Ecuador. A Peruvian isn't interested in Mexico. I know of a high-level Brazilian official who, when visited by a Bolivian

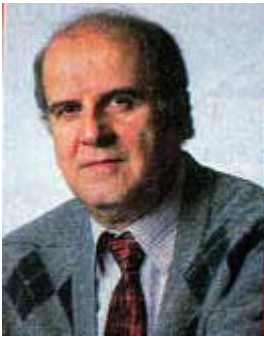
leader, asked him if Bolivia has a common border with Brazil.

Veja: Why is the United States so attacked in Latin America?

Gall: Right now President Bush is an easy target because of Iraq. But it's amazing how incapable the United States is of defending itself against leftist jargon, which uses terms like "neoliberalism". "Washington Consensus", and "privatizations" as if they were curse words. The wrongly-named "Washington Consensus" represented an effort to rediscover the basic laws of economics, especially those of public finance, when several countries faced a hyperinflation crisis and debt crises. The privatizations took place because, in most cases, state companies were losing lots of money, hemorrhaging public finances and feeding chronic inflation. I think that the United States, despite its sins such as supporting military dictatorships, has acted in the last century as a revolutionary force in Latin America, helping to improve the quality of public health, business management, agricultural production and mass consumption. In the last three decades, it has supported and promoted the strengthening of democracy. That is why I don't understand why the U.S. doesn't react to the vulgar jargon of its accusers.

Veja: Could it be that it's really worth becoming a Brazilian citizen, with all the problems that you have pointed out?

Gall: They are not only Brazilian problems. They are developmental problems common to many countries. But we can't forget all the progress that has already been achieved. Brazil continues to be a country of aspirations. If it makes the strategic long-term decision to concentrate its efforts on improving the quality of public education and physical infrastructure – roads, ports, electrical energy, sanitation – we can see a brilliant future for this country.



Around the Table with Homer and Machado de Assis

Roberto Pompeu de Toledo essay

A beautiful story of young people from public schools who get together in Reading Circles

cate/teach a way of life. The two complete a man, who is, metaphysically speaking, a naïve or empty vessel.” Machado de Assis’ prose is circulating around the table. At any moment, a reader can be interrupted by a comment. What is this second spirit that the author is talking about? When the story is finished, there is a discussion that tries to synthesize the ideas provoked by the text.

We are at a meeting of the Reading Circles, run by the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics, a research institute based in São Paulo. When American Norman Gall, the Institute’s director, was researching violence in Diadema, a town in Greater São Paulo, it reinforced his conviction that no social reforms in Diadema, or any other city, would work unless they started with the public school system. His wife, Catalina Pagés, a psychoanalyst from Catalonia in Spain, who has lived in Brazil for 40 years, had experience running Reading Circles with patients in the municipal insane asylum. What would happen if she did the same for students in public schools? And thus, the Reading Circles project, which is now in seventh year, was born.

The Reading Circles seek to rescue young people from one of the most glaring defects in Brazilian education: poor literacy education. Or, more precisely, the capacity for producing students who can recite the words in a sentence but are incapable of understanding what they mean. Today, the Circles reach 24 schools in the most troubled areas of Diadema and its neighboring satellite towns, known as the ABC region of São Paulo. Young people between the ages of 13 and 17 years of age get together to discuss classics such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, Plato’s *Symposium*, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Old Man and the Sea*

“Every human carries around two spirits/souls within him: one that looks from the inside out, the other from the outside in.” We are sitting around a table with a group of young people reading “The Mirror,” a classic short story by the Brazilian Machado de Assis. Each person reads a passage that is then taken up by his neighbor. “It’s clear that the function of both the first and second spirit is to communi-

cate/teach a way of life. When Spain’s former prime minister, Felipe González was in Brazil for a seminar at the Fernand Braudel Institute, he spent a free afternoon to read and debate “The Tale of the Undiscovered Island,” by José Saramago with one of the groups. He spoke in Spanish, the boys and girls in Portuguese. Recently one group came to the conclusion that the ending of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* was artificial and inconsistent with the development of the characters throughout book. They assigned themselves the task of coming up with different endings.

It is hard to believe that the Reading Circles evolved from simple good intention. They are well structured and follow rules and criteria that are the key to their survival and success. It is clearly a difficult task to maintain a relationship with the teachers and principals of the public schools and not make them feel that their territory has been invaded. Under the direction of Catalina and her partner Patrícia Guedes, the Circles work with what they call “educators” – 20-year-olds who have often come through the Circles themselves, who are in charge of the different groups. The educators are backed up by “multipliers”, chosen from among the students in the group who, among other duties, write a “log” or diary of what goes on in the group. Both educators and multipliers are paid. As a rule, the meetings are held in the schools. Students who stand out are invited to join groups that meet in São Paulo, more often than not coordinated by Catalina.

Given the success of the circles, there is pressure for them to grow. The Institute, however, prefers to take this slowly so as not to compromise quality. To cover the costs, the Institute receives support from the Instituto Unibanco and the GE Foundation. Besides paying for the educators and multipliers, there are books to buy and the transport costs to cover of the young people who journey to São Paulo. Everyone is poor, many of them children of migrants. Catalina often faces situations when, for example, one boy’s mother wanted him to go back to the Northeast which would have meant abandoning the Reading Circles. They called the mother to talk to her and convince her that it was a sin to cut off the investment in a child who was showing talent and a will to learn. The Reading Circles have discovered boys and girls with extraordinary talents among some of the poorest people. On the one hand, it is comforting to know that there are means to develop the gifts of young people born into difficult circumstances. On the other hand, it highlights a Brazilian tragedy: groups such as Catalina’s and Norman’s are just a drop of water in a desert of wasted talents, smothered by poverty and a lack of opportunities.