

Heinrich Böll Foundation

Meddling is the Only Way to Stay Relevant

by Marilene de Paula

| brazil | Germany |

In the 1980s, when I was an adolescent, movies often depicted the end of the world. Nuclear apocalypse was a reality, something that could take place in a matter of days. One of the movies that struck me the most was 1983's "The Day After," which told the story of a group of characters that experienced nuclear apocalypse; it was one of the most watched movies that year. The Chernobyl nuclear tragedy, which took place in 1986, turned our worries into reality. From that moment on, the fight against nuclear energy became an important issue for many pacifist movements. There existed a sense of insecurity, and, at the same time (or perhaps because of it) a search for novelty, for freedom, that forged a new generation with demands for rights. And, indeed, something was being rapidly transformed.

In our country, we lived through the end of the military dictatorship and the reopening of democracy, however fragile. But it was at precisely this moment that new political actors and new forms of seeing the world's problems emerged. A renewed Brazilian civil society with new political parties, a flourishing of NGOs and social movements in a broader experience of the CEBs (Base Ecclesiastical Communities)¹A creation of the Catholic Church. In 1968, the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America convened in Medellin, Colombia, and proposed the creation of these base communities as their primary pastoral instrument, connecting community-based models to the preferential option for the poor. This marked the beginning of Liberation Theology. The CEBs were born of a sociopolitical context marked by the authoritarian military regime and the consequent closure of channels of political participation. Reacting against the regime in the name of human rights, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), provided institutional support to the CEBs and to specific ministries (namely, the Indigenous, Land, Workers', and Youth Ministries). As such, in the 1970s and at the onset of the following decade, diverse social sectors found in the CEBs a space for political action, though they did not cease to be

religious spaces. (Via <http://www.fgv.br/cpdoc/acervo/dicionarios/verbete-tematico/comunidades-ecclesiais-de-base-cebs#:~:text=As%20comunidades%20ecclesiais%20de%20base,e%20a%20a%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20na%20sociedade>) strengthened old agendas, but with new formats: racial, with the Black movement; land-focused, with the MST landless worker's movement; and feminist, with the women's movement; were just a few of the experimentations through which people mobilized, demanding concrete changes.

New political forces were forged not just in Brazil, but around the world. In Germany, the environmental movement and the pacifist movement boomed with agendas against nuclear energy, the protection of natural resources, and the use of renewable energies as an alternative to fossil fuels. The women's movement and LGBT movement also became part of this political current. Some of their members opted to found a political party in 1980. It was in this political melting pot, made up of these movements, that Germany's Green Party came about, having gained key seats in Parliament in those years, and consolidating in 1990.

In Germany, political parties can only enter Parliament with a minimum of 5% of parliamentary seats. They then gain the right to form a foundation for national and international action. These foundations are a mix of institutions of political training, think tanks, and political-financial cooperation. They work with public money and are administratively independent of political parties. The Green Party thus took on the name of the writer Heinrich Böll, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972, and formed its foundation. Today, the organization has 33 offices internationally and reaches 60 different countries with its work. The foundation's Brazil office has operated out of Rio de Janeiro for the last 20 years. But what does it mean to have an international foundation acting in a country? Often seen as foreign bodies, life for such political entities is not always easy. It may help us to explain their line of action by first understanding the mechanisms and ideation of democracy and human rights. The Foundation is part of a body of political thought that has grown over the years, which dictates that the correlation of forces in a large part of countries is disadvantageous for minorities, and that one way of evening out this imbalance in the provision of rights is to strengthen civil society, recognizing it as a crucial element in the monitoring, denunciation, and social accountability of State institutions, but also private organizations.

Many of the countries in which the Foundation works maintain legitimately elected projects of antidemocratic populism, projects that do not envision the broadening and strengthening of human rights. On the contrary, feminist agendas, or plans for racial equality, or even the recognition of the rights of traditional peoples and populations, to name a few, are seen as inimical, and to be suppressed from debates and public policies.

These governments have also systematically suppressed or weakened institutions. Such institutions thus appear to function as intended, but do not. The danger of this sort of smoke curtain lies in the government's path toward limiting freedom of expression and organization, provoking the ascension of armed militias in society — creating an increase in armed conflict in rural and urban areas — and strengthening, through its discourse, radical and intolerant groups. Figures such as Donald Trump, president of the United States, Viktor Orbán, of Hungary, and Jair Bolsonaro, of Brazil, have become icons of this political moment. In Brazil, we see symbols of historically antidemocratic projects being used: swastikas on the arms of activists, torches and white hoods of the Klu Klux Klan² Via <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/05/31/apoiadores-de-bolsonaro-realizam-ato-em-frontera-ao-stf-com-tochas-e-mascaras.ghtml> (the white supremacist ideal in its full expression), the continuous violent assassination of Black men by the police, fanatic patriotism, religious fundamentalism, the denial of science, and violent discourse against civil society organizations. Such phenomena have all become commonplace in Brazil.

Over the last years, the Foundation has continued its work of supporting civil society in themes that we believe to be fundamental for the consolidation of democracy and of human rights in Brazil. In the field of environmental justice, we find ourselves at a crucial juncture. Environmental Minister Ricardo Salles, speaking at a cabinet meeting on April 22, 2020, affirmed that, with media spotlights turned to Covid-19, now is the moment to “walk the cattle through” and simplify environmental laws and regulations. Such talk demonstrates that the flexibilization of Brazilian environmental law is, today, a government policy directed toward the interests of the agroindustrial and mining groups³ Read more on the loosening of environmental laws in our webdossier <http://www.br.boell.org/pt-br/dossie-flexibilizacao-da-legislacao-socioambiental-brasileira-2-edicao>. Traditional peoples and populations, guardians of Brazilian biomes such as the Amazon, the Cerrado, and the Atlantic forest, are seen by these groups as impediments to

progress to be moved aside in whatever way possible. On top of this, we see the dismantling of environmental protection and control bodies such as the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the Chico Mendes Institute for the Conservation of Biodiversity (ICMBio). As fires raged in the Amazon over the last year, IBAMA applied one third less fines in 2019 than in the year prior, the lowest level in 24 years⁴Via

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2020/03/sob-bolsonaro-multas-ambientais-caem-34-para-menor-nivel-em-24-anos.shtml>. In February of 2020, President Jair Bolsonaro also signed a bill allowing for mining and electric energy generation in indigenous lands.

These disputes led to, according to Frontline Defenders, the killing of 23

activists⁵<https://www.cartacapital.com.br/sociedade/brasil-foi-o-4o-pais-que-mais-matou-ativistas-de-direitos-humanos-em-2019/> in Brazil in 2019. Disputes over rural and indigenous areas, in addition to confrontations over environmental concerns, were responsible for 40% of these killings. How do we deal with violence against human rights defenders? Civil society has alerted global society and international organs to what is happening in Brazil. In the Amazon, the Foundation supports the advocacy of organizations that are on the front lines together with defenders of human rights demanding territorial rights. The most affected have constructed collective strategies for protection, strengthening bonds of political and social solidarity. New groups of activists, in their majority youth, these collectives have come to stay, and have brought with them new strategies for taking on the struggle for rights. Collectives such as the Black Lives Matter movement, Nós por Nós, #AgoraÉQueSãoElas, the use of *mandato coletivo*⁶*Literally, collective or shared mandate, the system consists of a direct intervention by the population in the decision-making of a political representative during their mandate* <https://www.politize.com.br/mandato-coletivo/>, and so many others that have come about through the actions of collectives at the grassroots level. This has led to a growth in protests against State violence. That is, at the same time that necropolitics worsens⁷ As coined by Cameroonian philosopher and professor Achille Mbembe in 2003

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/postcol_theory/mbembe_22necropolitics22.pdf, the people respond. In Rio de Janeiro, based in joint construction and with the support of the Foundation to human rights organizations and

favela collectives, we have been able to contribute to the strengthening of these autonomous processes in defense of human rights, against the militarization of popular territories, and the killing of Black people. More recently, one example has been the launch, together with researchers, journalists, and human rights organizations, of publications that monitor police operations in Rio de Janeiro and the destruction and death they leave in their wake⁸ Hirata, Daniel & Grillo, Carolina G. Operações policiais no Rio de Janeiro. Fundação Heinrich Böll, 2019. Available at: <https://br.boell.org/pt-br/2019/12/21/operacoes-policiais-no-rio-de-janeiro..> The financial support of international institutions to civil society in this moment is an important contribution in this moment in which fundamentalist conservative forces are so strong.

Brazilian civil society is one of the most consolidated and active in the world. It is a global reference in terms of demands that generated effective public policies, such as racial quotas in public universities, secretariats for the promotion of women's rights, basic income for lower classes, and many others. What should be a source of pride for Brazil's young democracy, has recently come to be seen as an impediment to development. The shrinking of spaces for social participation, the criminalization of activists and institutions, defamation campaigns on social media and the murders of activists are part of a global phenomenon initiated by groups that see their interests being contested. One bill has sat in Congress since 2016: (PL 5,065/2016) excludes from Brazil's controversial anti-terrorism law (Law 13,260/2013) a paragraph that allows social movements and organizations the right to protest. The bill would criminalize the practice of protest. Barred by leftist parties, this and other measures are a source of constant worry. Another phenomenon is that of bureaucratic criminalization, in which an institution can have its actions made more difficult through the levying of new taxes, or even the paralyzation or delay in the reception of financial remittances from supporters abroad.

Over the last 20 years, the Foundation has supported hundreds of organizations and movements in various Brazilian states. These are projects with diverse aims, ranging from resistance actions such as those of the Raizeiras do Cerrado⁹ <http://www.pacari.org.br/>, who practice traditional medicine based in the use of local biodiversity as a concrete alternative and the valorization of local modes of life and knowledge in the green economy, to social movements against indiscriminate mining. The promotion of the rights of women is also

fundamental for the Foundation. In Recife (SOS Corpo¹⁰<https://soscorpo.org/>), Brasilia (CFEMEA¹¹<https://www.cfemea.org.br/>), and São Paulo (SOF¹²<https://www.sof.org.br/>), we support womens' organizations that promote debates and legislative action on the issue of women's sexual and reproductive rights and against gender-based violence. In Bahia, we support the actions of local groups of Black women against racism and violence.

The Böll Foundation, in addition to financial support to organizations, contributes to bringing the critical voices of Brazilian civil society to a broader audience, especially Germans. The Foundation also builds political debates with its partners, including forms of knowledge from different areas of the world. For example, we have held debates and supported proposals around the idea that it is no longer possible to continue exploiting natural resources in an irresponsible and predatory way. The profound environmental crisis that we live in should lead us to reject false solutions, such as agribusiness, the use of agrottoxins, payment for environmental services, etc. Three years ago we began launching a series of publications (The Meat Atlas and the Agribusiness Atlas¹³<http://www.br.boell.org/pt-br/2018/09/04/atlas-do-agronegocio-fatos-e-numeros-sobre-corporacoes-que-controlam-o-que-comemos>
<http://www.br.boell.org/pt-br/2016/09/06/atlas-da-carne-fatos-e-numeros-sobre-os-animais-que-comemos>
<http://www.br.boell.org/pt-br/2019/07/03/isto-nao-e- apenas-um-livro-de-receitas-e-um-jeito-de-mudar-o-mundo>) about meat supply chains and the role of agribusiness as a concentrator of lands and provocateur of socio-environmental conflicts, reaffirming that eating is a political act and that we must rethink what we put on our plates.

The Foundation's partners tell us that they often hear others say that the work to fight for rights seems to be a waste of time for many. It is not. Many of the conquests obtained from the struggles of specific groups benefit a much wider group. Quotas for Black people, indigenous peoples, and people with disabilities in public universities are one example of this, as they provided thousands of students with university-level education. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in 2018, Black and brown

students became, for the first time, the majority in public universities, at 50.3%¹⁴<https://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/educacao/negros-sao-maioria-pela-primeira-vez-nas-universidades-publicas-aponta-ibge-24077731>.

There have also been various legislative advancements in the feminist agenda, such as the creation of the Maria da Penha Law (11,340/2006), the Law Against Femicide (13,104/2015), the law making sexual harassment a crime (13,718/2018). The list is long. None of these conquests would have taken place if not for people, institutions, and legislators demanding rights and advancement for these populations. Yes, there is still work to be done. And perhaps they have not been able to achieve all that we believe. These rights could be broadened, but they exist, and we must fight everyday for this improvement. In a neighborhood, a city, an institution in which people are articulated, connected with the fight for rights, change happens more quickly. Even those who say, "I have nothing do with this," even so, are affected and benefit from the fruits of these initiatives.

But life is not so simple. Nothing is, actually. As the great US feminist, anti-racist leader Angela Davis tells us, "in a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist. We must be anti-racist." Her words ring even truer in Brazil. Heinrich Böll uttered the words that, for me, best reflect the constitutive ideals of the Foundation: "meddling is the only way to stay relevant." These words demand that we contemplate solutions beyond the individualist and consumerist society in which we live.

translated by **Edmund Ruge**