

# Intellectuals, democratization, and the fight against poverty in contemporary Brazil

## *Intelectuais, democratização e combate à pobreza no Brasil contemporâneo*

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### RESUMO

O texto aborda o tema da participação de intelectuais em projetos e programas de inclusão social no Brasil contemporâneo e toma como objeto de análise a trajetória político-intelectual de Herbert de Souza, o Betinho, e Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo, Frei Betto. Depois de examinar as formulações dos autores em torno dos problemas relativos ao elitismo das esquerdas brasileiras, volta-se para a análise da atuação de Betinho à frente da “Ação da Cidadania contra a fome, a miséria e pela vida”, e de Frei Betto como um dos dirigentes do “Fome Zero”.

Palavras-chave: intelectuais; esquerdas; democratização.

### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of the participation of intellectuals in social inclusion projects and programs in contemporary Brazil and analyzes the political and intellectual trajectory of Herbert de Souza (Betinho), and Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo (Frei Betto). After examining these authors' writings about problems related to the elitism of the Brazilian left, the paper turns to the analysis of Betinho's performance directing the project 'Action of Citizenship Against Hunger, Misery and for Life,' and Frei Betto's as one of the leaders of 'Zero Hunger.'

Keywords: intellectuals; left; democratization.

This text revolves around two intellectuals and two propositions. The intellectuals are Herbert de Souza, *Betinho*, and Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo, *Frei Betto*. Both from Minas, with a Catholic background, they marched alongside each other at the beginning of their political activism at the beginning of the 1960s, afterwards to physically and politically separate, in particular in the years following the crisis and the end of the military regime. In the final decades of the last century, they became key figures in

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Brazilian intellectual spheres, occupying importance spaces in the means of communication, and coming to work not just as ideologues submitted to the ethics of convictions, but also in direct contact with populations in the formulation of practical policies, under the ethics of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

The examination of the crossed itinerary<sup>2</sup> of these two ‘public intellectuals,’<sup>3</sup> in addition to helping us to situate and better understand some aspects related to the challenges faced by the Brazilian left in the 1980s and 1990s, also suggests to us new analytical perspectives about the political conditions which allowed the construction of wide-ranging public policies aimed at combating hunger and misery in the country, and which counted on the presence and leadership of Betinho and Frei Betto at different times and in different positions. In the 1990s, while Betinho positioned himself equidistant from political parties, being concerned fundamentally with coordinating movements with civil society, as in the campaign *Ação da Cidadania contra a fome, a miséria e pela vida* (Action of Citizenship against hunger, misery and for life), and acting in a subsidiary form in governmental councils, Frei Betto, alongside his pastoral work with the social movements, remained an explicit and confessed sympathizer of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT – Workers’ Party) and the successive candidacies of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva for the Brazilian Presidency. In 2003, he chose to accept the invitation of the then President Lula to join the group responsible for implementing *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger), which was intended to be the most important social program of his administration. At the end of the following year, disappointed with what he considered to be the distortion of the program, he resigned, refusing to accept any more public positions.

The text is divided into three sections. In the first, we will look at some important moments in the trajectory of the two characters: their entry into political life, the fight against the dictatorship, the *guerrilha*, the imprisonment of Frei Betto and the exile of Betinho. In following section their analysis of how the armed struggle had been defeated and failed in the country is focused on. Betinho dealt with these questions while in exile, when he had intense correspondence with various of his old comrades, including his *xará* (they shared the same first name) Betto. Frei Betto divided into the heart and soul of the *praxis* of Liberation Theology, becoming one of its principals

disseminators. In his writing he faced the challenge of reflecting on the complex relations between Christianity and Marxism.

In the final section, I will examine how both experienced being in charge of movements and programs concerned with fighting hunger and misery. In order not to lose myself in the vast font of sources existing about this question – consisting of numerous academic studies, government propaganda material, various interviews, etc. –, I have chosen to concentrate my research on the writings of the authors themselves and interviews with them, in which they explain the reasons why they saw the construction of an agenda to fight hunger and misery in the country as an important obligation. For both this agenda had to be necessarily linked with political procedures and practices which assured the leading role and the autonomy of social movements in relation to the state.

#### A ROAD WITHOUT RETURN

For many decades the history of the Brazilian left was confused that of the Brazilian Communist Party, *Partido Comunista do Brasil* in Portuguese, afterwards changed to *Partido Comunista Brasileiro* (PCB). The principal center of convergence of the communist ‘political family,’<sup>4</sup> the so-called *partidão* (literally big party) overcame both dissent and struggles within the field of the left with Trotskyites and/or socialists of various types, such as repression on a greater or lesser scale by the civilian governments during the ‘Democratic Era’ (1945-1964). A revolutionary Marxist and secular group, created in the 1920s, the Soviet experience was its principal political reference. At the end of the 1950s and the beginnings of the 1960s, even operating semi-underground, the PCB was able to exercise an important role in the organization of trade union and popular movements aimed at structural changes in the country, sometimes competing with and sometimes establishing alliances with other leftwing forces, with the *trabalhistas*/nationalists, and with leftwing Christians. During the two decades of the military dictatorship (1964-1985), the PCB fought for the formation of a democratic political front composed of liberals and the left aimed at fighting the dictatorship, maintaining a position critical of the theses of the extreme-left organizations which then defended the armed struggle. In the 1980s and 1990s, in democratic

times, the PCB ended up succumbing to internal disputes and an extremely unfavorable external scenario.

*Trabalhismo* (workerism) is another 'family' with a strong political tradition in Brazilian political life. Fruit of a political operation led by President Vargas (1930-1945 and 1951-1954), along with union leaders and professional politicians, aimed at creating a grouping which could take responsibility for the social inheritance of his government, the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB – Brazilian Labor Party), which over time would become the principal axis in the struggle for a national-statist project in which the foundations were the defense of national sovereignty against imperialist action; *distributionism*; and the guarantee of the social rights of workers.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the 1960s, the PTB, having won significant electoral victories, became the second largest Brazilian party, making itself a real alternative to the power of the conservative forces. In 1964, the overthrow of the *trabalhista* president João Goulart by a political coalition led by the army had a devastating effect on the party, which like the other political parties was terminated in 1965. Fifteen years later, *Trabalhismo* was reorganized around the leadership of Leonel Brizola (a former leader of the PTB) and the new *Partido Democrático Trabalhista* (PDT – Democratic Labor Party).

Another important part of the political mobilization of the Brazilian left in the 1950s and 1960s were the movements which brought together members of various Catholic entities – *Juventude Universitária Católica* (JUC – Catholic University Youth), *Juventude Estudantil Católica* (JEC – Catholic Student Youth), *Juventude Operária Católica* (JOC – Catholic Worker Youth), and *Ação Operária Católica* (ACO – Catholic Worker Action), amongst others. Fruit of the important process of renewal occurring within the Church – of which there were various vectors, including those originating from the new directive emanating from Popes John XXIII and Paul VI –, in the 1960s these movements, accompanying the 'political grammar' of the time, advanced in such a way as to put in check the propositions of the top ranking hierarchy of the Catholic Church which opposed more forceful action against the so-called Brazilian Revolution. More specifically out of the left wing of the JUC there emerged a new revolutionary movement – *Ação Popular* (Popular Action) – whose political orientation was based on an original mixture of Marxism and the concepts defended by currents of Christian

humanism, which were shown to be critical of both liberalism and capitalism, and the Soviet model of socialism. During the years of the military-civil dictatorship, AP went underground and followed other extreme left organizations in defense of the armed struggle. In the 1970s, AP, then called APML, went in the direction of Maoism, and dissolved itself in the *Partido Comunista do Brasil* (PCdoB – Communist Party of Brazil).<sup>6</sup>

Herbert de Souza, Betinho, a well-known figure in radical Belo Horizonte circles in the 1950s, having been in various of its principal spaces of sociability, namely: Colégio Estadual Central, the former Ginásio Mineiro, the principal public secondary school in the city; Faculdade de Ciências Econômicas (Face) – which later became part of Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) –, a nursery of PCB members and activists, as well as of extreme left organizations; Catholic discussion groups; meetings of activists in front of São José Church, São Luís Cinema and the numerous bars of the state capital. Having participated in the creation of AP in 1962, Betinho soon became one of its main political leaders and in this condition began to participate directly in the João Goulart administration.

In 1964, hunted by the military regime, he went underground and headed into exile in Uruguay, where he was part of a group of activists under the leadership of Leonel Brizola involved in a project to overthrow the military government. After the failure of attempts at guerilla warfare inspired by Brizola and Che Guevara, he returned to Brazil and became active in AP again. After working in a porcelain factory, following the directive of the organization that its activists should make themselves more proletarian to purge their petit-bourgeois past, at the beginning of 1971 Betinho left for a new exile, now in the socialist Chile of Salvador Allende. In Santiago he began a process of questioning his experience in AP, even leaving the organization at the same time that he became involved in projects connected to the Allende administration in the academic area. In 1973, following Pinochet's coup against Allende, he left on a new exile in Panama, Canada and Mexico, successively, before finally returning to Brazil in the middle of 1979, as a result of the approval of the Amnesty Law.<sup>7</sup>

Carlos Alberto, afterwards known as Frei Betto, was born in 1944 and was nine years younger than Betinho. At the end of the 1950s, he became friendly with Henrique, one of the younger brothers of Betinho, who would

afterwards become known as Henfil – one of the most important Brazilian cartoonists. At the age of 15, Carlos Alberto joined the *Juventude Estudantil Católica* (JEC – Catholic Student Youth), becoming a few years later one of its national leaders, which caused him to move to Rio de Janeiro. It was then, around 1962, that he came into closer contact with Betinho, since the latter when he came to Rio de Janeiro stayed in the apartment in which Carlos Alberto and the other leaders of JEC and JUC lived.

In a recent interview, Frei Betto said that he followed closely Betinho's moving away from JUC, as well as the creation of AP, with which he was sympathetic. According to him:

I never joined AP, although I was sympathetic to it, because the CNBB would not let the leaders of *Ação Católica* have any connection with any political institution, something I agreed with. I read all the documents, I knew the other founders of AP, Vinícius Caldeira Brant, Lucio Nunes and José Alberto da Fonseca, who of the four is the only one alive, and is still my friend today.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding these times he mentions a curious case in relation to the two of them: his arrest by mistake in June 1964, when he was confused with Betinho:

In 64 after the coup Betinho was one of the most wanted figures. In June 64 my apartment was raided by the Navy – I told all of this in detail in *Batismo de Sangue* – and I was arrested as if I was Betinho, because that night the round-up of *Ação Popular* took place and the apartment was raided, not for being *Ação Católica*, but for being *Ação Popular*. It was not, but in the mind of Cenimar, who did the round-up, it was the same thing. I was brought to Ilha das Cobras as if I were Betinho. And of my two arrests, this one did not last long, because afterwards Dom Jaime Câmara, who was the Cardinal, entered into the circuit and managed that our case was transformed into house arrest, but it was the only one in which I was tortured, because there was this coincidence Betto/Betinho/Belo Horizonte, and the belief that *Ação Católica* was *Ação Popular*... and Betinho died saying he owed me a debt and I would say that I hoped he would not pay, because I had been beaten up in his place.<sup>9</sup>

In 1965, Carlos Alberto chose to become a Dominican friar in the Catholic Church, becoming a professed secular brother, in other words

without taking the sacrament which would allow him exercise the functions of the priesthood. A short while later, he accumulated activities in São Paulo, mixing his religious work with that of a student of philosophy in Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and as a journalist in *Folha da Tarde*. It was on this occasion that Frei Betto and other Dominicans began to have regular contacts with Carlos Marighella, the principal leader of *Ação de Libertação Nacional* (ALN – National Liberation Action) – an organization that split from PCB because it defended guerrilla action against the military government. A supporter of ALN, Frei Betto went to Rio Grande do Sul to set up a scheme to help the flight of the organization’s activists on the run. At the end of 1969, following the assassination of Marighella by the government’s repressive forces, Frei Betto and his fellow Dominican friars were arrested. In prison he wrote letters denouncing the atrocities occurring in Brazilian prisons. These letters were put together in a book, published in Italy and Sweden, and only later in Brazil. During the four years he was in prison (1969-1973), he experienced and saw everything:

Four years in the underground of history. Chains, wings, strong cells, police vans, blood, revolts, interrogations, torture, screams, bloods, escapes, searches, kidnappings, murders, disappearances, blood. In my hands, a bag, a few personal objects, half a dozen books, the bible, and an aluminum mug brought as a souvenir.<sup>10</sup>

Frei Betto left prison on 4 October 1973. After the bitter years of that experience which he called the ‘Baptism of Fire,’ he decided to remain in Brazil, not listening to the appeals of his family and friends that he should leave the country. He then left for the city of Vitória, the capital of Espírito Santo state, with the purpose of participating in the creation of the *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs – ecclesiastic grassroots communities) and rebuilding his life.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW

In his exile in Canada and Mexico, Betinho, even though he had moved away from the organization he had created – AP –, alongside his academic duties in high level teaching institutions, carried out intense political activity,

being frequently in contact with different people from the Brazilian left. Good material to monitor this trajectory is the correspondence he sent to his friends, to those from his former political group, acquaintances, and family members. For the limited objectives of this text, we will just look at some extracts from letters between him and his *xará*, Frei Betto.

On 30 January 1978 Betinho wrote a long letter to his contemporary. The tone is one of proximity of those who have known each other a long time. He shows his satisfaction with agreeing with the words of Frei Betto about the role of social movements in Brazil at the end of the 1970s and the elitism of our political class. Discussing these themes, Betinho proposed to make a balance not just of his trajectory, but of his generation – prior to that of Frei Betto. He stated:

We belong to a generation which desired to enter politics and some dead, others alive, we did. It was not easy to perceive what we learned from the old professors from the dominant classes, even when we illustrate our practice with the lessons from the old teachers in the dominated classes... The elitism of what you speak is the most visible part of a long, heavy and strong anti-democratic Brazilian tradition in political life and culture.

Continuing the tone of self-criticism he added:

The fascination with power, with something magic, almost religious, which led us to transform society instead of following the safe paths, slow and painful for the people, often led us to approximate their enlightened interpretations and those of the state, where the Brazilian people never were... (in Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.89)

In the same letter, Betinho, in his dialogue with Frei Betto, introduced some images into his narrative which remind us of the militant who at the beginning of the 1960s had been one of the leaders of JUC and AP in defense of what was called the 'historic ideal.' In a specific passage, analyzing the Brazilian political moment, he mentions two historic temporalities: that of immediate action and of the 'dimension of the future' which is 'present today.' The former associates the creation of parties led by the petit-bourgeoisie trying to 'embrace the people,' to the actions of the Church, the student movements, in short to social and political actors. The second, which is broader and opens



new perspectives, is associated with the construction of democracy: “the only thing capable of practicing ‘popular practices’.” Then he continues: “the great question which concerns me and leaves me uneasy is: how to think big, real, and in what fundamental and concrete form which MOBILIZES, which awakens energies, which adds, which makes each man, each worker, a being totally mobilized for the transformation of all and for all.”

Concluding, he remains confident in the transformative power of man. He states:

There exist moments in the lives of people where this mobilization, this strength, this energy, is incarnated in a leadership, in a movement, a context... I do not see this as a purely spiritual force, it is, but I believe that it is the cementing material of human history, the energy put into movement when a real perspective is opened in the great project, in the great dream of all of us... (ibidem, p.90)

In the letter to his *xará*, Betinho makes little mention of how he intends to work in the construction of the new. Perhaps because he himself had doubts, like many of his generation during the throes of exile. Taking into account part of the correspondence which he received from his friends and members of his former political group, it can be seen that many of them believed that Betinho would join some party or organization after his return to Brazil. This was the case, for example, of letters written to him by activists who at that time had joined with Leonel Brizola and insisted on keeping him up-to-date about the movements that were occurring in relation to the reformation of the *Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro* abroad. In 1978, after moving from Canada to Mexico City, Betinho remained in frequent contact with intellectuals and activists who were involved in the creation of the so-called *novo trabalhismo*, such as Theotônio dos Santos, Vania Bambilra, Neiva Moreira, Francisco Julião and Flávio Tavares, amongst others. Not by chance, in June 1979 Betinho moved from Mexico City to the Portuguese capital in order to accompany and participate in the re-founding of the PTB in the so-called Congress of Lisbon. Betinho thus reactivated old political ties with Brizola, originally created in the years preceding the 1964 coup, which he created with the latter the *Frente de Mobilização Popular* (FMP – Popular Mobilization Front), or even in the period immediately after the overthrow of João Goulart, when he was involved in the attempted establishing of

'Brizolista' guerrilla groups in Uruguay. Later in the 1990s, in other words, when Betinho already had a supra-party image, these ties with Brizola were strategically ended by being disqualified, or even forgotten, by him and his biographers.

Another valuable source for seeking to understand what Betinho thought about what he and the Brazilian left should do when they returned to Brazil is his text published in the collection *Memórias do exílio* (Memories of exile) – a work which includes a significant set of statements by Brazilian exiles who were spread across various parts of the world, being published first in Portugal in 1976, and two years later in Brazil. In his statement, Betinho does not mince words and present readers with a wide-ranging and critical discussion of his political trajectory as a leader of JUC and AP and his life in exile. He shows himself to be a militant of flesh and blood, reporting doubts and personal suffering, without hiding the difficulties of his being a hemophiliac. He talks about what he considers to be the mistakes of the proletarianization of AP – in which he also participated as a worker in porcelain factory, as we have seen –, as well as denouncing the incongruence of the leadership of the organization in the defense of a 'popular war' against the dictatorship. He stated: "The most incredible adventure, that of proposing popular was in 1968-1969, without have a popular base, and without war, this was not militarism, this was Marxism-Leninism-Maoism."<sup>11</sup>

Following this set of criticisms, Betinho presented the central question of his text and asked all of the Brazilian left directly: why did it get to this? And he answers: "I believe it was the result of forgetting to keep our feet on the ground. I mean, you maintain the mystique, maintain the feeling of commitment, maintain the family ... All of this I have seen and I perceived it in fantastic comrades. However, in the middle of this context one thing was missing: reality was missing, politics was missing" (in Cavalcanti, 1978, p.87).

For Betinho, exile in the Chile of Salvador Allende was fundamental for him to better perceive the voluntarist, vanguardist and elitist perceptions of his organization. Who makes a Revolution, he says, is not the vanguard, the revolutionaries, the revolutionary party:

Who makes the Revolution is the mass struggle, it is history, and sometimes the actual bourgeois who create the conditions for Revolution ... a revolutionary is much more a participant in the socially existing process that someone who cre-

ates the conditions for it. When I tried to say things like this I was labeled with being spontaneous, because this was denying the party. (ibidem, p.91)

In his statement Betinho did not want to leave anything standing. He wanted to disentangle himself from his past, or better from a life marked by a 'religious attitude to reality.' For him, the Brazilian left, like those from Latin America, to the contrary of what they thought, were essentially religious in their dogmatic and unrealistic pattern of action: "The first thing I learned was the loss of a missionary meaning. Look, I am not one of the 12 apostles, nor the thirteen. I discovered that I am a common and current citizen." In this extract and in others, Betinho leaves clear his discomfort and stresses the need to change and abandon revolutionary projects seen by him as vanguardist and/or religious.

I believe it is important to emphasize, in reading these extracts from Betinho's statement, that they should not be analyzed in isolation, as the exclusive fruit of an individual rupture on his part with a good part of that history of struggles, even though this is not, in some form, undeserved. In my opinion, his harsh words for himself and his contemporaries should be situated within a process of self-criticism through which a good part of the exiled leftist activists were passing, in exile and in Brazil. As Denise Rollemberg showed in her important study of the context of Brazilian exile in the 1960s and 1970s, after the euphoria of the socialist experience in Allende's Chile had passed, the years following 11 September 1973 and the bombing of La Moneda Palace were a time of diaspora and re-adaptation, since with the defeat of the revolutionary project, the illusion of a rapid return to Brazil had come crashing to earth. Time passed, Rollemberg said: "Activism gained another significance. The way of dealing with daily life was reevaluated. Values changed... From a political culture that was basically authoritarian, it moved to the valuation, although still unequal, of democracy." And she continued about the effects of exile for many:

The exiles reevaluated the project which had been defeated, abandoning some of its central aspects, adding others, reconstructing paths and concepts of the world, redefining themselves. Amongst what they left behind and what they saw before them, the contradictions, the traditions of the past, the novelties of the present. The future. In this struggle, if they were not shipwrecked, the exiles ex-

perienced the painful and wonderful experience of metamorphosis, becoming others, without losing all the traits of the previous condition.<sup>12</sup>

In September 1979, Betinho landed in Rio de Janeiro as another man. In his plans there was no space for the creation of parties or even party activism, despite his affective proximity with important members of the *novo trabalhismo*. He came with plans to form a center for the analysis of government policies (*centro de análise de políticas governamentais* – CAPG), later achieved under the name of *Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas* (Ibase – Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis). Finally, he was also known nationally as ‘Henfil’s brother’ – since this expression was part of the lyrics of a song entitled *O bêbado e a equilibrista*, by Aldir Blanc e João Bosco, which as sung by Elis Regina had become the anthem of the amnesty campaign in Brazil.

Frei Betto, as we have seen, left the hell of prison in São Paulo to take refuge in a Dominican convent in Vitória. In his book entitled *Mosca Azul* (Blue Fly), in which he talks about his experience of 30 years in public life, between 1974 and 2004, he tells readers about his reencountering pastoral work in the ecclesiastic grassroots communities. He said that on that occasion he was surprised by the strength of the popular movement which “had not been organized by us from the official left, adorned with the professed theories in polished academic rigor which transubstantiated them into religious dogmas.” He continues with the direct criticism:

How can the people organize if we, the ‘vanguard,’ the leaders, are in jail? How can they create movements for housing, for fighting against famine, for women, blacks, the indigenous peoples, human rights,... if we, intellectuals, we who know Marxism well... we, the helmsmen, are not at the head of their movements? (What pretension!) (Betto, 2006, p.50)

Frei Betto did not go to Vitória by chance. In the state capital he could count on the support and guidance of the archbishop, d. João Batista da Mota e Albuquerque, and the auxiliary bishop d. Luís Gonzaga Fernandes, two members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church who, alongside d. Helder Câmara and other important leaders for the so-called progressive wing of the Church, defended more intense pastoral work with the popular groups. In compliance with the resolutions of the II General Conference of the Latin

American Episcopate, held in Medellín in 1968, which advocated a greater presence of the Church in the social transformation of Latin America. On this occasion Liberation Theology began to take shape – an organic group of propositions which, according to one of its principal names, Gustavo Gutiérrez, represented “an attempt to understand faith through historic praxis, liberating and subverting the poor of this world, the exploited classes, the despised races, the marginalized cultures. It was born in the restless hope for liberation.”<sup>13</sup>

In Vitória, Frei Betto found the proper conditions to intensely experience this new moment in the history of the Brazilian Catholic church, or better, if we want to be more precise, part of the Church. It was on this occasion that he was corresponding with Betinho and realized that they were both more or less talking about the same thing. For Betinho, in Spanish exile and afterwards in Mexico, it was time to break with the recent past and for personal and professional recollection. Something new – democracy – was still to come. It still had to be constructed. While for Frei Betto, free, willing and with support from his peers, the time was to advance popular education and to create a new Church based on the ecclesiastical grassroots communities. In a further strike against the methods and vanguardism of the traditional lefts, he stated: “We, agents of the pastoral, have in our favor religious language. Not the hermetic vocabulary of the left, the strange dialect to the ears of the poor, the ‘correlation of forces,’ ‘class antagonism,’ ‘historic contradiction.’ It was popular language, this raw material which wove, in religious categories, the most elementary ideology, and not for this any less critical or revolutionary.” And he concluded: “The community awoke to discover that if God is the father and if we are brothers and sisters, such inequality is not justified.”<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the 1970s, Frei Betto returned to São Paulo to work as the coordinator of Workers’ Pastoral in São Bernardo do Campo, one of the industrial cities in the state which had emerged and grown around the automobile industry. In São Bernardo, as in the other two cities of the so-called ABC Paulista (Santo André and São Caetano do Sul), a power trade union movement had emerged which opposed the authoritarian labor legislation of the military regime through successive strikes. At the head of the movement was Luís Inácio da Silva, called Lula, president of the Metalworkers Union of São Bernardo. In 1980 Frei Betto and Lula met, together participating in the

creation of the National Union of Popular Movements (*Articulação Nacional dos Movimentos Populares e Nacionais* (Anampos), the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – PT) and the Single Workers Union Federation (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores* – CUT). For Frei Betto, what was new, the popular had gained a face.

### 'BETINHO'S CAMPAIGN' AND *FOME ZERO*

Francisco de Oliveira and Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos, two important Brazilian intellectuals have in recent works<sup>15</sup> called attention to changes which occurred in the structures and dynamics of 'politics'<sup>16</sup> in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s. For the former, those years were marked by a 'reinvention of politics' led by fractions of the dominated classes who came to work with the construction of an agenda which resulted in three of the most important political inventions of the recent history of Brazil: the trade unionism of CUT, the PT and MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* – Movement of Landless Workers). For Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos the years which followed the military regime were a time of "participatory exuberance, with the inclusion of the illiterate in the ranks of votes, with the Constituent Assembly and the continued mobilization of the adult population in the circulation provoked by the social division of labor and multiplication of interest groups, all these processes added up, creating positive expectations about the immediate future of each" (Santos, 2006, p.179).

Bettino and Frei Betto intensely experienced these two decades of changes and of 'democratic invention.'<sup>17</sup> The former, now installed in Ibase, was directly involved in the various campaigns which had a national impact. One was about a question which had historically marked his trajectory and that of his generation: Agrarian Reform. Far from being a settling of accounts with the past, as Dulce Pandolfi and Luciana Heymann accurately stated in their book on Bettino, the National Campaign for Agrarian Reform (*Campanha Nacional pela Reforma Agrária* – CNRA) "found a foundation in the perception that agrarian reform, given the mobilization that, despite the military regime, was intensifying again in the countryside, made complete sense for the country. More than that it was a cause into which converged

social movements and various actors from the countryside” (Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.128).

The end of the military regime in 1985, followed by the convocation of a Constituent Assembly in 1987, represented a key moment for the CNRA to take form in order to pressurize public authorities to support the advance of agrarian reform in the country. Various events were held for this, even the presentation of a constitutional amendment by popular initiative, signed by a million and a half people, in which were gathered an organic set of propositions to change the structures of the Brazilian countryside. The Ibase team, coordinated by Betinho, had a central role, both in the formulation and leading of the campaign.

One of Betinho’s theaters of struggle was the press, through which he continually sought to keep dialogue open with public opinion. He was thus able to become known among large sectors of the population of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil as a whole, as an activist devoted to social causes and a defender of citizen participation. Thus, it is possible to understand his nomination by Mayor Saturnino Braga in 1988 to the position of Defender of the People of Rio de Janeiro – in which he was responsible for listening to and submitting the demands of the population to municipal agencies. In the following years as the crisis of violence worsened in Rio de Janeiro, accompanied by a noticeable increase in the levels of crimes, Betinho became involved in other campaigns in defense of the city he had chosen to live in and to raise his family.

At the beginning of the 1990s significant sectors of Brazilian society, in the wake of the mobilizations of the previous decade, held successive political demonstrations calling for the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello, who had been accused of serious charges of corruption. In the wake of this mobilization there emerged the Movement for Ethics in Politics (*Movimento pela Ética na Política* – MEP), which was supported by numerous social society organizations, including Ibase. The following year, after President Collor had lost office, the entities which had been in MEP held discussion which, according to Pandolfi and Heymann, resulted in the idea of holding a campaign to combat hunger and misery in the country (Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.180).

Another version of the origin of the campaign against hunger was reported to us by Frei Betto in a recent interview. According to him, Lula was

responsible for the initiative of pushing forward the campaign and not MEP. According to Frei Betto:

It is a historical fact. I was there and I cannot deny it, with all respect and recognition of the role which Betinho played in the question of hunger in Brazil... Really he transformed this question, which was a taboo, raised by Josué de Castro, into a political fact. It is just that this [was] proposed by Lula in a meeting in São Paulo at which Betinho and I were present, and Lula proposed the campaign and the name of Betinho: "Betinho, you and dom Mauro [Morelli] can do this." And so Betinho took over the campaign and its took off, and it was exactly what he wanted, as it did not have a party character ... In a general manner, he never recognized that the idea of the campaign had come from Lula.

Divergences apart, I believe that it is more important now, in this stage of the research, to pay attention to the part which Frei Betto emphasized that Betinho, by calling the campaign to himself, transformed it into a political fact, which, in other words, can be expressed as follows: Betinho places the theme— for the first time — on the Brazilian public agenda. How did he manage this? Through which instruments and methods did he manage to make wide segments of the population aware? How was he able to transform the campaign entitled 'Action of Citizenship Against Hunger, Misery, and for Life,' into the most important solidarity movement in Brazilian society until then?

As we have seen, in the 1980s Betinho had built a public image of great credibility with various sectors of public opinion. As in Belo Horizonte at the beginning of the 1960s, he moved with ease between various places and political groups, preserving his independence and remaining far from parties and political factions. His political discourse in this campaign was aimed at the whole, the global, the people, the nation, no longer at the peasants, the workers, the oppressed. He prepared the narrative of a statesman — with maxims such as "Those who are hungry are in a rush" —, at a moment when the country had recently emerged from a serious political crisis and was under the direction of the provisional government of Itamar Franco.

Furthermore, Betinho did not blink when facing the discourse of sectors of the left who saw in the campaign nothing more, nothing less, than the reproduction of the old practices of welfarism. In relation to this point



in particular, Betinho stated that it was crucial to link the emergency and structural dimensions, and that it also had to be considered that “acting in the emergency without considering the structural is contributing to the perpetuation of misery. Proposing the structural without acting in the emergency is practicing short-term cynicism in the name of long-term philanthropy” (in Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.180).

In relation to the methods and instruments necessary for the campaign, Betinho was concerned with not adopting measures which would mean that *Ação da Cidadania* could be confused with a government or state program. The motor was civil society and there was no single model or script to be followed by all. A harsh critic of models of political centralization and a defender of proposals which emerged at the initiative of the various organizing committees all over the country, Betinho thus defined the three general principles on which the campaign should be based: “Partnership because it proposes to bring together those who give and those who receive. Initiative because it does not present answers, but raises questions and demands solutions. Decentralization because it does not establish a hierarchical model, but rather stimulates actions without imposing coordination” (in Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.181).

Due to the above, it is not difficult to understand why *Ação da Cidadania* became known and confused by the public at large as ‘Betinho’s Campaign.’ Various reasons exist for this: a simple, direct and encompassing discourse; a fragile physical posture but at the same time determined; charisma; detachment for positions and a clear commitment to the social; etc. This does not mean, however, that he did not suffer harsh criticisms or pressure. Frei Betto, for example, reports that he remained distant from the campaign, since he had severe criticisms about the way it was conducted by Betinho:

I had a very strong critique: it was very centered on the person of Betinho. I even said so in a meeting with him here in Rio, that he did not socialize power, and he was very annoyed. I felt this, that in the moment in which he would disappeared... He had a position exactly opposite to mine; he was against organizing too much. I said: the problem is that you have to organize, because the movement has to have continuity, irrespective of its leaders. He was the movement and he had difficulty, for example, to have someone who could organize the movement in the Northeast, another in the South, and divide power and debate

with these guys the directions of the movement. I was always the opposite. I really defended that the movement had to be more organic. I felt that things were reaching a certain momentum and afterwards they would end. They would be ending, ending, and then they were gone. It had to do with this lacking an organic nature.<sup>18</sup>

Due to these pressures, there were episodes of disagreements between Betinho and members close to the PT who in 1994 defended the candidacy of Lula for president of Brazil. One of these episodes is documented in the correspondence between Oded Grajew, a progressive businessman engaged in the Lula's campaign and Betinho. Oded, in a letter dated 15 August 1994, was the spokesperson for the PT demanding that Betinho declare explicit support for the PT candidate since, according to Oded, Lula had been responsible for the initiative to create the campaign against hunger and to indicate Betinho's name to lead the campaign. Oded concluded by presenting the public options available to Betinho:

take a position and lose the almost unanimity of public opinion or frustrate the expectation of loyal friends and comrades in common struggle; or also help to have a government capable of carrying out actions against misery or stay exempt from taking part and continue in a campaign which only creates expectations and tries to provide make-up for a perverse public administration. (in Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.215)

Betinho responded two days later. In his letter, in addition to attributing the origin of the campaign to the actions of MEP, he clearly presents his distrust of power. According to him, he is concerned with society and not with government, saying that: "between the president and the citizen, I will stay with the citizen." He says he is anti-statist and defends the democratization of the state. He also says that he is critical of the PT and Lula himself. As if remembering old ghosts of the revolutionary left in which he had been involved, he stated:

Deep down the PT still believes in a single party, the one which has the truth, the path, the light, the coherence, the ethics. This vision it has of itself frightens me. This vision is totalitarian because it intends to impose on all what is only a partial truth. For this reason the PT does not know how to make alliances, nego-

tiate, cede, compose, add. It only joins with those who are in agreement with the left side of its heart. But is Brazil a country of the left? (in Pandolfi; Heymann, 2005, p.217)

By 1995 Betinho's Campaign had run out of breath. The country was experiencing a new political moment marked by the arrival of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the presidency of Brazil, elected the previous year in the first round by wide-ranging sectors of Brazilian society. Alongside an agenda concerned with the consolidation of the economic stabilization of the Real Plan, FHC sought to redesign social policy with a set of initiatives part of the Solidarity Community program. It was now time to regularize, ordain, institutionalize, and to have less mobilization campaigns. For this reason, Betinho, who initially had been involved in official actions, ended up withdrawing from Solidarity Community and the government. In August 1997, Betinho died of Aids in Rio de Janeiro.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Frei Betto, consolidated his presence as a key-figure in the progressive current of the Catholic Church with social movements, maintaining his activism in *Articulação Nacional dos Movimentos Populares e Sindicais* and his political and personal proximity with Luís Inácio Lula da Silva and with sectors of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). *Pari passu*, he made his reputation as an intellectual and writer, being awarded in 1986 the prestigious Juca Pato trophy by the Brazilian Union of Writers. Between 1980 and 2000, he wrote or coauthored 35 books about various topics. Amongst these, one which had a great impact was *Fidel e a Religião* (Brasiliense, 1986), in which he published a long interview with the Cuban leader about Marxism and religion and about the relationship between the government of Cuba and the Catholic Church.

While Betinho in those years carried out his work with Ibase and with civil society, Frei Betto lived intensely the revolutionary processes of Central America, in Nicaragua and El Salvador, which counted on the presence of religious leaders among the rebel leaders. In Brazil the so-called Liberation Theology gained space, at the same time that it began to be 'domesticated' by the top ranking hierarchy of the Catholic Church under the orders of John Paul II.

In the 1990s the PT transformed itself into the principal party of opposition to the federal government, having on its side the most important union

and popular groups. Bringing together trade union leaders and remainders of the revolutionary left, the grouping also attracted widespread support from local leaders, many of whom had come from the ecclesiastical grassroots communities. Slowly the PT built its hegemony in the in the field of the left. In 2002, after having been defeated three times, Lula, was elected president of Brazil for the PT. In his book *A mosca azul*, Frei Betto reports the victory of his friend with great emotion. In relation to the inauguration of Lula in 2003 he states:

The Esplanade [of the Ministries] was transfigured into a red square... The strange taste in the throat, emotion overflowing into tears, a rabble drunk from such lucidity. The *sertão* had become sea, overflowing from all eaves, fears had fallen asleep. The tide was rising, climbing on the wave of five centuries of pregnancy, bubbling glad tidings; then the birth; and the blood, which was not little, transmuted into compost, now offered the bouquet of the first born. Renaissance. (Betto, 2006a, p.22)

Frei Betto accepted Lula's invitation to assume, for the first time in his life, an official position: that of Presidential adviser for the mobilization of the *Fome Zero* program. This, which for a certain time would be the government's main program in social policy, was concerned with concentrating the actions of the public authorities in Brazil on the reduction of hunger, which was to be based on citizen action under the supervision of administrative committees all over the country. Due to his enormous experience in popular education and in the formation of the ecclesiastic grassroots communities (CEBs), Frei Betto was to be one of the principal links of the government with popular movements. Oded Grajew, as mentioned above, was to work with the business class.

The *Fome Zero* team, of whom Frei Betto was one of the principal names, drafted a project which in the latter's view not only complied with its task of social mobilization and raising awareness about the problem, like 'Betinho's Campaign.' Alongside working with public opinion, a public policy was drafted which assumed the use of a considerable amount of government resources, as well as constant initiatives involving information and social mobilization carried out by a wide ranging of popular educators – which was called *Talher*. In relation to the role of 'Betinho's Campaign' for *Fome Zero*, Frei Betto

categorically stated: “Betinho’s Campaign against Hunger was fundamental for Fome Zero. The ‘push’ he had given was enormously helpful for *Fome Zero*. Perhaps *Fome Zero* would not have had the impact it had if it had not been for Betinho.”<sup>19</sup>

In thesis, *Fome Zero* had everything necessary to be the spinal backbone of a new social policy in the country. In practice, however, the story was different. Looking at the version presented by Frei Betto in his book *Calendário do Poder* – a version which obviously needs to be confronted with those of other people –, it can be seen that the government decided to bury it. For this a new program was used – *Bolsa Família* (Family Allowance) –, which has been one of the factors responsible in recent years for the fall in the levels of social inequality in the country.

In his book/diary Frei Betto left his discontent clear with the way the hardcore of the Lula administration decided to boycott *Fome Zero*. Among the reasons for this was the threat that the program could represent – whether through the administrative committees, or through the work of popular educators – to the traditional political control that the conservative forces exercised. This was exactly what the PT government, focusing on the municipal elections, did not want. At the end of 2004, Frei Betto decides to leave the government, making clear his discontent with its conservative and electoral-focused agenda.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this text my objective was to establish some connections between the actions of two intellectual activists and the construction of a new social agenda in Brazil. By examining the inter-crossed trajectory of these two men, we can make some preliminary conclusions.

In the still ongoing research about this theme, it has been noted that one of the foundational axes of the new Brazilian social agenda in the twenty-first century was been a set of Christian inspired movements called by Michel Löwy ‘liberation Christianity.’<sup>20</sup> Certainly, many have been involved on a daily basis in the construction of this, but we cannot ignore the leading roles of Betinho and Frei Betto in this process.

Betinho and Frei Betto were part of the same ‘political family.’ Their origins are similar and they shared certain values, as well as defending the adoption of participatory methods aimed at citizen action. However, their itineraries followed different directions, and they were not always on the same political side. Betinho, as we have seen, after the drama of exile, left aside any party based project to achieve power. At the same time he nourished the belief in the solidarity and inventive capacity of the people. Frei Betto, in turn, spent four years in prison. He left it intact and willing to dive into pastoral work and popular education. For decades he maintained this work, which led to his experience in government – also bitter – which represented only a short period in his long career as a social activist.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between these two types of intellectuals, certainly inspired by Max Weber, is presented in BOBBIO, Norberto. *Os intelectuais e o poder*. São Paulo: Ed. Unesp, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> In relation to the use of the notion of itinerary for the study of the history of intellectuals, see SIRINELLI, J. F. Le hasard ou la nécessité? Une histoire en chantier: l’histoire des intellectuels. *Vingtième Siècle*, Revue d’histoire, n.9, p.97-108, janv.-mars 1986. See also by the same author: *Intelectuais*. In: REMOND, René. *Por uma história política*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV, 1996. p.231-269.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the category of ‘public intellectual’ is based on the following definition by Edward Said: it is the “individual gifted with a vocation to represent, give form to, and articulate a message, a point of view, an attitude, a philosophy, or opinion for (and also by) a public.” See: SAID, Edward. *Representações do intelectual: as conferências Reith 1993*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> In relation to the concept of ‘political family,’ see: DUTRA, Eliane. História e culturas políticas: definições, usos, genealogias. *Varia História*, Belo Horizonte: Departamento de História da UFMG, n.28, p.13-28, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> In relation to the basis of national-statism, see: REIS, Daniel Aarão. *Ditadura militar, esquerdas e sociedade*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2000. For the *trabalhista* project, see, amongst others, NEVES, Lucília de Almeida. *PTB: do getulismo ao reformismo (1945-1964)*. São Paulo: Marco Zero, 1988; GOMES, Angela de Castro. *Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (1945-1964): getulismo, trabalhismo, nacionalismo e reformas de base*. In: FERREIRA, Jorge; REIS, Daniel Aarão (Org.). *Nacionalismo e reformismo radical (1945-1964)*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2007. (As esquerdas no Brasil, v.2). p.55-81.

<sup>6</sup> In relation to the AP, see the important study by RIDENTI, Marcelo. *Ação Popular: cristianismo e marxismo*. In: RIDENTI, Marcelo; REIS, Daniel Aarão (Org.). *Partidos e orga-*

nizações dos anos 20 ao 60. Campinas (SP): Ed. Unicamp, 2007. (História do marxismo no Brasil, v.5). p.227-302. Ver ainda: CIAMBARELLA, Alessandra. Do cristianismo ao maoísmo. In: FERREIRA, Jorge; REIS, Daniel Aarão (Org.). *Revolução e democracia (1964-...)*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2007. (As esquerdas no Brasil, v.3). p.99-132.

<sup>7</sup> For a vision of Betinho's itinerary as a whole, see: PANDOLFI, Dulce; HEYMANN, Luciana (Org.). *Um abraço, Betinho*. Rio de Janeiro, Ed. FGV/CPDOC/Ibase; Garamond, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Frei Betto by the author. Rio de Janeiro, 29 Feb. 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Frei Betto by the author. Rio de Janeiro, 29 Feb. 2012. 2012.

<sup>10</sup> BETTO, Frei. *A mosca azul: reflexão sobre o poder*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2006. p.41.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Herbert de Souza (Betinho). In: CAVALCANTI, Pedro Celso Uchôa et al. *Memórias do Exílio*. São Paulo: Ed. Livramento, 1978. p.87.

<sup>12</sup> ROLLEMBERG, Denise. Vidas no exílio. In: SEMINÁRIO 40 ANOS DO GOLPE DE 1964. Rio de Janeiro: Faperj; Sete Letras, 2004. p.203-204. See by the same author: *Exílio: entre raízes e radares*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> GUTIÉRREZ, Gustavo. *A força histórica dos pobres*. Petrópolis (RJ): Vozes, 1981. p.58.

<sup>14</sup> BETTO, Frei. *Calendário do poder*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2006a. p.52.

<sup>15</sup> OLIVEIRA, Francisco de; RIZEK, Cibele S. (Org.). *A era da indeterminação*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2007; e SANTOS, Wanderley Guilherme dos. *Horizonte do desejo: instabilidade, fracasso e inércia social*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> In relation to the notion of politics used here, see: ROSANVALLON, Pierre. *Por uma história do político*. São Paulo: Alameda, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> In relation to the notion, see: LEFORT, Claude. *A invenção democrática: os limites da dominação autoritária*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Frei Betto by the author. Rio de Janeiro, 29 Feb. 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Frei Betto by the author. Rio de Janeiro, 29 Feb. 2012.

<sup>20</sup> LÖWY, Michel. Cristianismo da Libertação e marxismo: de 1960 a nossos dias. In: RIDENTI, Marcelo; REIS, Daniel Aarão (Org.). *Partidos e movimentos após os anos 1960*. Campinas (SP): Ed. Unicamp, 2007. (História do Marxismo no Brasil, v.6). p.411-437.