

What Latin America Is Reading

By Erico Verissimo

Erico Verissimo, one of the most popular Brazilian novelists, has published many books in his own country, two of which, "Musica ao Longo" and "Caminhos Cruzados," won for him the Machado de Assis and the Graca Aranha Prizes. He has done much to familiarize his countrymen with American and English letters, translating Steinbeck, Hilton and Huxley into Portuguese and writing a book of his own about the United States. As a guest of the State Department he lectured on Brazilian literature at the University of California and was on the staff of the Casa Panamericana at Mills College. The following story was written exclusively for The Star.

PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL.

I WAS asked to write an article on any interesting trends which have come up in Latin America as writers now turn their attention to a world at peace. My first impulse is to state bluntly that there is no such a thing as Latin America or a world at peace.

For I don't think one should write about Latin Americans in terms of a group of psychologically or politically united nations. We speak, for instance, of Central America, and still Mexico in so many respects is different from either Costa Rica or Panama. Columbia and Venezuela don't differ too much from the other republics on the Pacific, but they certainly have distinctive characteristics of their own. For the sake of simplification we may group Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Bolivia and even Paraguay in one block. But Argentinians, who claim to be the only pure European population in South Amer-



"In the big orchestra of the United Nations, Latin America does not play even second fiddle, but only a noisy out-of-tune marimba." —Illustration by Newman Sudduth.

ica, like to be considered a nation apart. Then little Uruguay, a South American version of Switzerland—a democratic republic where political exiles from neighboring countries usually flock—is a kind of tampon state dangerously sandwiched between nationalistic Argentina and gigantic

Brazil. And finally we have Brazil, the only Portuguese speaking and non-Hispanic country south of the Rio Grande.

As to peace, everybody knows that the mere cessation of war does not mean actual peace. It seems that we are now enjoying (and I am not sure that enjoying is the right term) a kind of truce.

Countries Have Many Traits in Common

That said, we can safely admit that the Latin American republics have many traits in common. To begin with, there is their eco-

nomie dependence on the United States. They also have the same Catholic background, a semifeudalistic society and last but not least a common source of spiritual and artistic influence: the Iberian Peninsula and France. If we accept all those facts as valid, we will have reduced our field. And if I single out in this article the Brazilian scene, using it as a kind of demonstration, the whole business will become still simpler.

As some people may know, Brazil was on the side of the United Nations against Germany in World War II. She even sent

an expeditionary force to fight in Italy. But if you look at Brazil today you will have the impression that she lost the war. Her system of transportation (ordinarily very poor and ineffective) has been disrupted, as many of her merchant ships were sunk by the German U-boats. There is a tremendous shortage of meat, milk, butter and especially wheat all over the country. People wait in long queues to buy those articles, and sometimes even then they don't get them. In Rio even drinking water is scarce. Inflation is on. Prices are high. Production is at its lowest. Salaries have risen, but what is the use of that in a country where prices are rising too? There is a very active black market, and Brazilians are beginning to lose their traditional sense of humor and patience, to become irritated and even predatorily aggressive. Of course, I am not blaming only the war for all that. Greedy, unscrupulous, profiteering merchants are chiefly responsible for such a calamitous situation.

That Kind of Unrest Which Comes From Fear

Brazilians suffer from a chronic disease of the body—poverty, aggravated by a chronic disease of the mind—unrest, that kind of unrest which comes from fear. But fear of what? Fear of a revolution. You never feel secure.

If you are a Catholic you fear a Communist revolution that you have been told will mean utter violence, the burning of churches, the killing of priests and the establishment of a ruthless, materialistic government modeled after that of Soviet Russia. If you are a Communist you fear the reactionary group. And if you are a liberal you fear the possibility of both the Communist and the Fascist revolution. Moreover, as long as everybody knows that no revolution may triumph in Brazil which has no support from the army, a new fear arises—the fear of a military dictatorship. The Integralists, Brazil's green-shirted Fascists, also are trying a comeback.

Among so many poignant problems and such a swarm of confusing issues, Brazilian writers sometimes are perplexed. Some of them have joined the Communist ranks, but their majority belongs to a group known as Esquerda Democratica, or Democratic Left, meaning that although they are Socialists and very much against social injustice, they don't go for Stalin nor for the one-party system. They prize highly the four freedoms, and they believe in a revolution by consent. Some of the representative authors of the country belong to that group. How to get rid of capitalism without playing into the hands of Communism? How to avoid a dictatorship of the Right without creating circumstances favorable to a dictatorship of the Left. And, above all, how to give the masses real opportunities of getting better food, better housing and clothing, as well as effective medical care and a decent education? Those are the questions that Latin American writers are asking now. Sometimes they grow somber, bitter and disillusioned, and it is only natural that such a dark mood should color their writings. That is one of the reasons why Latin American novels are not popular in the United States, where readers generally love success tales, and hardly understand or sympathize with submerged characters and stories about poverty and frustration.

Prior to the middle 20s, writers in Latin America used to follow European literary patterns and were mainly preoccupied with esthetic questions. From the 1929 crash up to this day they have been socially conscious and very much concerned with national problems. They are viewing their fellow countrymen and their social and economic problems with a realistic eye, and their essays and stories generally have a Marxist touch.

Another important group in Brazil is the one composed of writers interested in the psychological novel.

For these the main crisis is spiritual, not economic, and the characters in their stories are always in search of God, and harassed by the idea of sin and the devil. A neat leftish wing has developed recently within the ancient, strong citadel of the church, and its members oppose their social-democratic views to the medievalistic trend of the extreme right.

Well, with some differences in (See LATIN AMERICA, Page 22.)

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