GOETZ FRANK OTTMANN

LOST FOR WORDS?

Brazilian Liberationism in the 1990s

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

Edilene, Cleide, and Maria da Glória are veteran Catholic community activists and administrators of the day-care centers in Jardim[1] (Jd.) Vista Alegre, a *bairro* (neighborhood) at the northern fringe of São Paulo. In the neoliberal environment of the mid-1990s, these day-care and youth centers underwent severe funding cuts. Faced with the seemingly impossible task of adjusting to the new political climate, their project is in profound crisis. Adriana, a veteran political activist in the same region, complains about the political apathy she encounters in the groups she is trying to mobilize. Her eleventh land occupation, which she initiated during 1996, shows ominous signs of a lack of unity that seems to stem from an ambivalence surrounding the collective identities of participants. Padre Pedro, one of the *liberationist* Catholic priests who have been working in the region since the early 1990s, has lost his faith in the revolution from the bottom up. He sums this up in one of his more polemical statements: "The masses here won't rise up at the best of times." In the words of Julie, an Irish Catholic activist who has been in the region for more than thirty years, the trouble with these local activists is their attachment to a discourse that "is really a discourse of the 1980s. Today something else is happening. What, then, is the discourse of the '90s?" she asks, immediately answering her own question with yet another one: "Maybe we don't need a discourse of the '90s?"

Activists and members of militant Catholic communities in one of the few regions that have enjoyed the unabated support of São Paulo's progressive ecclesiastical hierarchy made these comments in 1996. They reveal the depth of the liberationist crisis. The symbolism that inspired hundreds of thousands of citizens to take to the streets just a decade earlier now seems to lack mobilizing power, and the procession (*caminhada*) of the people (*o povo*) into a better future has come to a halt. Political achievements of the past two decades, such as the establishment of day- and health-care centers, are evanescing as rapidly as the centers are deteriorating. The extraordinary communitarian spirit that, according to many academic observers, defined the (authentic) culture of popular[2] neighborhoods (*bairros populares*) during the 1970s and 1980s has disappeared, and drugs, gang warfare, and domestic violence appear to have undermined the last vestiges of collective action (Doimo 1995). Militants who try to reignite the vigor of *the struggle* (*a luta*) complain about movement participants' fighting predominantly for individual gains. All these factors point toward a complete implosion of the liberationist struggle. Terms like *fragmentation* or *individualism* have been used, perhaps justly, by authors like Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Gómes (1996) to describe the state of Brazilian popular politics in the 1990s.

AIMS AND FOCUS

Despite such evidence, on the basis of which many academic commentators discarded the liberationist struggle, my field work in four low-income *bairros* at the northern fringe of São Paulo, Brazil, cemented my conviction that this academic retreat was in many ways premature. Abandoning militant Catholic communities during an admittedly spectacular instance of crisis precludes any possibility of gaining important insights into the remaking of liberationism. In fact, the information gathered between 1995 and 1998 suggests that such a remaking is actually taking place. Liberationist pastoral practice inspired by liberationist thought continues to give rise to new initiatives that transform and renovate the symbolic universe of the struggle.

In the *bairros*, local conditions, conflicts, and experiences continue to be reworked in liberationist terms to form a frame of reference that contains "the specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alter-

native modes of action" (Zald 1996, 262), called here a Catholic liberationist symbolic universe. However, the significant changes within this universe can be fathomed only if the religious symbolic sphere is reconsidered as a dynamic factor. Largely overlooked by authors who deal with Brazilian popular politics, the religious imagery and faith that underpin the struggle have been explained predominantly in secular terms. As a consequence, concepts such as pragmatist responses to everyday experiences have come to replace catechist reflection and spiritual guidance. Such a secular reading of popular politics, however, is inevitably incomplete because it neglects the fact that in the liberationist struggle religious imagery and politics are fused together and mutually inform one another. The course of Brazilian politics gains an explanatory dimension when the contested nature of this religious symbolic universe is taken into account.

Focusing on the symbolic dimension of the struggle brings to light the contestation that occurs within this realm, a contestation that has encouraged as well as obstructed the development of a new political and religious *bairro* culture. This book documents the struggle over representation and meaning involving three groups: local residents, Catholic and secular militants, and the progressive Catholic Church. In this struggle individual interest groups try to impose their frame of reference on the political and spiritual outlook of other group members. They semantically rearticulate, assimilate, or colonize the symbolic universe of other actors. The book is also an account of an endeavor to stem or undermine such colonization efforts.

Following Stephen Greenblatt in *Possessões maravilhosas*, I see the *bairros* as a sphere of various conflicting symbolic universes shaped and reinterpreted by assimilative processes (Greenblatt 1996, 20). Through these assimilative processes, webs of meaning are attached to symbols that previously conjured up different images.[3] These webs of meaning, alongside stories, rituals, and world views, form part of a cultural repository people may draw on to solve problems encountered in everyday life. In this sense, "culture, with religion as one of its central components, offers a repertoire of discursive and nondiscursive resources from which individuals may draw to articulate identities and to construct alternative strategies of action to deal with the particular existential predicament they confront" (Vásquez 1998, 11). Hence, rather than conceiving the symbolic universe as merely discursive, as text that has no bearing on the decisions of actors, the following pages will demonstrate, time and time again, the linear connection between meaning and action.

In order to render visible this reelaboration of symbolic meaning and its effect on decisions and, consequently, practice, I will concentrate on concepts such as *the people*, *authenticity*, *the struggle*, and *popular culture*, key symbols that have been of enormous importance in popular politics during the 1970s and 1980s. These concepts form a recurrent feature in the work of authors who have been studying the role of the progressive Catholic Church in Brazil (see, for instance, Assies 1999; Burdick 1993; Drogus 1997; Lehmann 1996; Mariz 1994; Nagle 1997; Vásquez 1998). Despite the centrality of these concepts, only David Lehmann's (1996) contribution attempts to delineate the cultural universe of what he terms the culture of *basismo* and unravels some of the contradictions embedded in the currents of *basismo*. *Basista* Catholicism, as defined by Lehmann, "depicts an idealized image of popular culture in the face of which its activists and theorists prostrate themselves in an almost reverential manner: the result is that they try very hard to take up the habits and idioms of this popular culture in order to bring the Catholic religion, as they see it, nearer to the people and also in order to reform Catholicism itself in the direction of the point of view of the poor" (1996, 18). As the term *basismo* has turned into a catch-all phrase for any intellectual current or movement that claims to take seriously the concerns of poor people, I use it only sparingly. Moreover, as nuances and marked differences within the current of *basismo* are important to my argument, I will stick with terms such as liberationist theology, liberationist thought, and vanguardism, using the term *basismo* only if the occasion invites a rendering reminiscent of Lehmann's.

The following pages reveal the story of the genesis, death, and resurrection of liberationist projects in four popular neighborhoods in São Paulo that enjoyed the support of a progressive diocese for the time of the study. As the neighborhoods were, by and large, shielded from the conservative currents emanating from the Vatican during the 1980s and 1990s, they offer an opportunity to study the liberationist project under conditions unfettered by institutional constraints, often cited as one of the main impediments to liberationism in Brazil. By tracing the shifts in the symbolic sphere of *bairro* politics, this volume provides new insights into how local militancy is constructed, undermined, and reconstructed within a liberationist institutional space. In this way, I hope that my work will enrich our understanding of currents in Brazilian popular politics beyond the realm of the *bairros* studied.