

LATIN AMERICAN DIARY

Seth Tillman

In December 1966 Seth Tillman, who is a consultant to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, undertook a trip to Latin America to study "not the organization and administration but something of the philosophy, purpose, and self-assessment of the Peace Corps and its volunteers." worldview is pleased to have been granted permission to publish a small portion of the diary he kept on his journey, printed for the use of the Foreign Relations Committee.

December 1, 1967—Recife. After flying all night from Miami, I arrived in Recife this morning. I wanted to see the town, the shanty towns which are called "favelas" (the word is the Portuguese equivalent of the Spanish "barriadas"), the dry "sertao" of the interior if possible and one or more of the coastal sugar plantations.

The northeast of Brazil is divided into two general regions: the coastal sugar plantations, owned by powerful but not always prosperous sugar barons and worked by illiterates, most of whom receive less than the Federal minimum wage of \$26 a month; and the interior *sertao*, populated by illiterate and extremely poor farmers who, in the frequent droughts, often starve or pour desperately into Recife or other cities.

My AID control officer, a consulate liaison officer, and a bright young Peace Corps volunteer took me on a tour of the favela of Olinda, outside of Recife. I have never, never, seen anything like it. The people live in small shacks made of bits of wood, mud, straw or anything they can get. There are no sanitary facilities and some of the houses are on stilts over filthy, stagnant water. A foul stream runs through the middle of the favela. The people use it, I am told, for washing and bathing. They are bad-looking people, for the most part small, emaciated, stunted, dirty, and shabbily dressed. And there were thousands of them, standing around, sitting on the dirty ground, not doing much of anything. The men sometimes go in to town to seek work for the day, usually unloading sugar, or to beg. Some just seem to sit around in the favela doing nothing.

There are great numbers of children in the favela of Olinda, shabby and badly dressed. Many of the smaller ones are naked and many have the bloated bellies which are caused by malnutrition. There are

so many of these children and there is little or no hope for them in life.

I asked the Peace Corps volunteer if there were health services available to them and he said that there were public clinics but that doctors were slipshod and inattentive, that they often would not bother to examine a patient from the favelas, that they did not like to treat these wretched people. And of course the people, ignorant as they are, often do not seek medical care or do not return if they are made to wait. One way or another, I get the impression that, whatever exists on paper, there is little or no medical care for the poor in fact.

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We toured the city of Recife, went a little outside of it and then saw another favela only a few blocks from my hotel, which is on the fashionable road along the ocean.

We visited a church in Recife and it was beautiful — decked out in goldleaf. A nun took us around and was obviously very proud. I noticed as we left a poor old man — he may have been young but he looked old — lying on the ground outside the church and I thought about the goldleaf and fine carving inside.

When you see the favela, it is hard to understand why we and the Russians and everybody else don't have the impulse to get together, to drop the arms and space races and give all of our energy and effort to the favelas of the world, because they are not to be endured, because they are indecent. I do not understand — I completely fail to understand — why all the human misery in the world is not regarded as the most urgent and important problem, requiring precedent over all others. Of course, I have just seen the favelas of Recife and I am a bit "emotional," not "realistic" in my outlook.

An AID official gave a stag dinner in the evening. We talked at length about aid, its execution and its concepts, about bilateralism and internationalization. The AID official said that the program here does not in fact humiliate the Brazilians nor, he thought, do we "push them around" in any visible manner. He thought it might be well to put development lending under multilateral authority while keeping technical assistance under U.S. control; because, he argued, we have the skill and experience in this field, but he also

thought it would be wise to engage third country citizens whenever possible to assist in the execution of technical assistance.

December 2, 1966 – Recife. We went to the sugar plantation and “usina” (factory), Vitoria do Santo Antaõ, where we were shown the process of making sugar from raw cane. It is a privately owned usina, mechanized but in a flimsy structure with walls, floors, and ceilings whose collapse seems imminent. There are few safety devices to protect the workers.

It does not seem to take many workers to run an usina. They are lucky because, I am told, they usually receive the minimum wage of \$26 a month. That is better than the cane pickers do. I am told the workers are inefficient, among other reasons because they have been ill-nourished all their lives. They look terrible – shabby, dirty, and underfed – as do so many of the people of northeastern Brazil.

After conducting us through the usina, the manager showed us some figures indicating that the usina’s profit margin was very low. This seems likely; the northeastern producers are inefficient compared to others and their yields per hectare, owing to soil exhaustion and inefficient methods, are very low.

• We proceeded to Caruaru, a city of over 100,000 about two hours’ drive from Recife, and then some thirty kilometers out to the “short sertao,” a bleak area of scrubby, dry hills which resembles the sertao farther inland. It is inhospitable land.

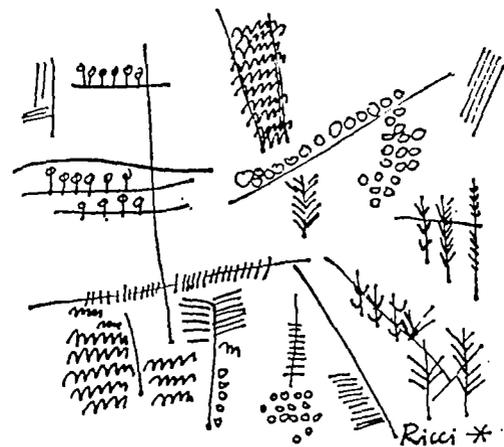
We stopped in a bleak village made up of closely arranged hovels along the two sides of a broad dusty street. The Peace Corps volunteer and I walked down the street and we went to two houses. One was a dirty little shack barely big enough to hold a dirty little bed. The volunteer talked with the owner, a blind Negro. He was just sitting on his stoop. For all one knows he has sat there and will continue to sit there all his life. He did not know how old he was.

The woman next door, who was sitting inside her door working with a sewing machine, permitted us to enter. Her tiny house, made of mud and sticks, held a family of six. Behind the front room was a little passage, a small bedroom filled by a large dirty bed, and a kitchen with a kind of clay stove. Pigs wandered in and out of the house, nosing in the slop and around the floors. We thanked the woman for letting us see her house. She still sat at the sewing machine; above her head on the wall were some worn and cracked religious pictures.

We returned through Caruaru to Recife. The volunteer and I had dinner and then went to the favela

in Olinda where we visited some Peace Corps volunteers and one Brazilian, a medical student who is a Communist or of the Left. He said that he was offended by the American war in Vietnam and by the intervention in the Dominican Republic. He said that from morning until night a Brazilian’s life is filled with reminders of the United States: he shaves with a Gillette razor, lights his house with a Westinghouse bulb, rides in an American car fueled with Shell or Atlantic gasoline.

I asked him about the reaction to Senator Fulbright’s Dominican speech among Brazilian students. He said that they thought that it was probably contrived by the American Government as a hypocritical device to allay the hostility of Latin American students and others by an “arranged” self-criticism.



I talked at length with one volunteer, a social worker, who is organizing the people of the Olinda favela to fill in a pestilent open swamp. He was glad to have food for peace as payment for work on the project; he said it was better than a handout, that the work and pay gave the people some pride. He said that these people, whom he obviously likes, give up easily, in the face of any obstacle, because they are so used to being pushed around. He said that they were given attention in a clinic usually only when a volunteer went along and demanded that attention be paid. The volunteers are big people, because they are Americans. (The Brazilian boy had said that Americans in Brazil act like “little gods.”)

We talked of Brazil and America and of poverty. The volunteer social worker is proud of what he is doing and has a high spirit, as do the other volunteers. He does not think the Peace Corps should be expanded; it should be highly selective, he thought, but not in the direction of conventional “well-balanced” people. The “oddballs,” he said, make the contributions. I spoke of the magnitude of the problem of pov-

erty, of the fact that, for all that was being done by the Peace Corps and others, the poor countries were sliding downhill.

The volunteer didn't have an answer for this; nor do I. But I keep thinking of the insanity and inhumanity of a world in which arms and bombs and going to the moon are the important things. I think also of the outrage and moral indignation we Americans felt about the Berlin Wall. The Berliners don't know anything about suffering compared to the silent illiterates of the favelas of Recife. Why are we not outraged about them? Why aren't we filled with angry indignation when we see human beings so degraded? Why don't we even know about them?

I like the volunteers. It may be that they are doing lasting good for the people in the favelas; they are certainly doing lasting good for themselves and for their country — and I don't mean in the sense of "image making"; I am thinking about the kind of citizens they will be when they come home.

From Recife, Mr. Tillman went on to Rio de Janeiro, Salvador in the Brazilian state of Bahia, Belo Horizonte in Minas Gerais state, Brasilia and São Paulo; next to Buenos Aires; then Santiago and Antofagasta in Chile; Bogatá and Medellin, Columbia; Lima, Arequipa, Puno and Cuzco, Peru. Everywhere, as his diary records, he talked at length with AID and Embassy officials, Peace Corpsmen, both volunteers and directors, and also with local residents and volunteer workers from other nations. He visited still other favelas and barriadas in the cities and their environs and traveled to numerous country towns. A brief summary of his trip, recorded in a final entry dated January 7, 1967, appears below.

January 7, 1967 — Cuzco to Lima and Lima Airport. Closing this diary, I return to the paradox regarding the Peace Corps which has recurred through these notes. On the one hand the Peace Corps represents a useful, indeed necessary, effort to provide needed assistance to developing countries. On the other hand, there is the fact, mitigated to be sure by the idealism, decency, and modesty of most of the volunteers but a fact nonetheless, that the volunteers represent the United States and, however hard they may wish and try to do so, they cannot be wholly separated from all that the United States stands for in Latin America. Like the diplomats, the AID officials and even the imperfectly hidden C.I.A. men, they are *gringos*, dedicated to a good and far-reaching purpose, to an effort to "change the rules of the game," but bound nonetheless, however much against their will, to an uneasy

and ambiguous relationship with all those other *gringos* who are "playing the game."

It is no accident, misunderstanding or mere lack of clarity that underlies the ambiguous and uneasy relationship between the Peace Corps volunteers and the operating agents of U.S. foreign policy. As I have noted, the volunteers are snobbish toward the diplomats and the AID people; they believe that, being down in the gutsy places with the *pobladores* and the *campesinos*, they are serving a more basic and at the same time a much higher purpose than the desk jockeys, and although their condescensions are at times both unfair and unkind, the distinction they make is basic and their snobbery is not so bad a thing insofar as it reinforces the distinction between themselves and the operational officials of U.S. foreign policy.

At the same time — and here is where the ambiguity appears — both the volunteers and their directors want financial support from AID, for the moment primarily from the small projects funds of AID but, as projects develop, they may want greater financial support and such financing may be necessary and desirable for the projects involved. As some of the volunteers have told me, there is a limit to self-help; one cannot create capital where there is none, out of mud huts and ragged *campesinos*. Peace Corps people want financial support and some of them want extensive *tactical* cooperation with AID, but they most emphatically do not want to become agents of AID projects and instruments of AID purposes; they do not want to be taken into camp.

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They say they can "use" AID for *their* purposes but this I doubt they can do; the leading volunteers and their directors are neither naive nor simpleminded but they are and should be political amateurs and the "operators" are professionals. If there is to be a contest as to who is going to be put to the other's purposes, as to who is going to be taken into whose camp, the Peace Corps will be fighting on the "enemy's" terms and it is likely to be a contest between pigeons and hawks.

Many diplomats and AID people would probably like to use the volunteers for their own short-term purposes, keenly or only mildly, depending on how seriously they take the Peace Corps. I recall, for example, a diplomat who bragged to me about what he believed to be his personal power over the Peace Corps; I recall, also, his concept of the American role in Brazil as one of "bringing about the kind of Brazil *we* want." I think also of the fundamental difference in outlook between some of the Foreign Service officers and the volunteers, as evidenced by the comment of one, to which I

have referred, that some effort or other by the volunteers was a fine thing because it "gave us some good propaganda." And I recall the ludicrous relationships between the volunteers in one of the places I visited and a young vice consul whose consuming interest in the identity and location of local Communists has given the volunteers the idea that this diplomat was the C.I.A.'s local spook. Finally, I recall the patronizing attitude toward the Peace Corps on the part of some — though by no means all — of the AID people I have met; the volunteers, in their view, are Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts out doing good deeds, and who knows when they might come in handy? But it is they, the AID men with the money, who represent the big-time.

My point, thus far, is that the operational agents of U.S. foreign policy have an outlook and purposes which are different from those of the Peace Corps, that they probably would welcome the chance to harness the Peace Corps to these purposes, and that if they tried to do so they would probably succeed, turning the Peace Corps into something quite different from what it is intended to be and now is.

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What can be done to secure the Peace Corps as an organization for "changing the rules of the game," as an organization dedicated not to *conducting* but to *civilizing* and *humanizing* international relations? How is the Peace Corps to protect and preserve the enormously valuable but highly destructible idealism of its volunteers?

I suggest the internationalization of the Peace Corps. There are already volunteers in underdeveloped countries from various countries other than the United States; they are there under one kind of sponsorship or another, including that of their governments, of universities, and of private organizations. I visited one site in Lima where an American was working with German volunteers and another in Puno where an English girl, sponsored, I believe, by the United Nations Association of the United Kingdom, was working with Americans. The collaboration is natural and extremely promising; it brings together young people from different countries with similar motivations of practical idealism and, in so doing, suggests the possibility that an internationalized volunteer service could advance purposes which are entirely compatible with but beyond the reach of the American Peace Corps, such purposes, broadly speaking, as the following:

First, internationalization would place the Peace Corps securely beyond the reach of domestic politics and conventional foreign policy, eliminating once and for all the ambivalent relationship between the vol-

unteers with their one set of purposes and the operating agents of their country's foreign policy who have a quite different set of purposes.

Second, by expanding the pool of volunteer talent from the United States to the world, and by reducing if not eliminating the psychological strains of a bilateral relationship between needy recipients and benevolent gringos, an internationalized volunteer service would be able to do more, with greater prospects of success, to advance the fundamental purpose of the American Peace Corps, which is to instill hopeful and creative new *attitudes* in people who have been retarded by attitudes of submissiveness, resignation, and a failure to appreciate their own individual and collective capacities. Specifically, an international volunteer service might be able to make a dent on the horrendous birth-control problem, which is now being lost, by establishing sympathetic contact with the uneducated millions who most need to be reached and who are largely beyond the effective reach of government education programs and even the mass media.

Third, an internationalized volunteer service would contribute, solidly but modestly, to the gradual building of an international community. It could and should include volunteers from all countries caring to participate, regardless of ideology, and, indeed, should be a world organization. If it should be so constituted, it could then help to alleviate ideological hostilities by bringing receptive people together in cooperative efforts to which ideology would be irrelevant.

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For these three essential reasons — to remove the Peace Corps from domestic political pressures, to advance the development of the poor countries, and to contribute to the building of an international community — the American Peace Corps should be merged into an international peace corps or volunteer service under the direction of the United Nations. Volunteers should be recruited directly by an administrative organ constituted by and responsible to the United Nations from any and all countries caring to participate, to be assigned to service in any and all countries requesting their services. For the period of their service volunteers should be under the direction of no national government but should be exclusively under the direction of and responsible to the United Nations.

The internationalization of the Peace Corps could breathe new life into the United Nations. Indeed the vesting in it of this new and major function might well turn out to be the most important single step toward the revival and reconstitution of the United Nations since its enfeeblement in the cold-war years following World War II.