

Brazil is My *Berührungsangst*

By *Marcelo Backes*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

I have *Berührungsängste* – fear of touch, contact, engagement – toward my country. What began as an affectation, no later than Bolsonaro's election in 2018, had become a disease, a syndrome. I'm sick of Brazil, and of the man in power who is obsessed with stupidity, crudeness, and bloodlust. The worst president in the history of this country, who believes the dictatorship started with a mistake – only torturing where it should have killed – continues to enjoy an approval rating of about 40% nationally. The discourse led by Bolsonaro and his supporters is directed against people of non-white skin colour, against the weak and sexually marginalised in society. They harass artists as well as people who work with culture and the arts, who in his eyes, are nothing more than leaches on the system who, with their degenerate art, violate family values and good manners. Beyond those specialised in violence – the military – Bolsonaro can count on the most violent amateurs of barbarism. The pandemic, fuelled and exacerbated by Bolsonaro's grotesque actions, is really just the cherry on top of a fascist cake that was rotten from the start.

Tormented to the point of being unable to translate or write, I still teach at least. In this respect, the digital world opened up as an alternative in 2020. The course participants (most of them women) from Rio are joined by those connected via Zoom from São Paulo, Recife, Porto Alegre, Maceió, New York, London, and Londrina. More than ever, I exercise my increasingly innocuous function as a 'private scholar' of literature, perceiving that a Fidel Castro is needed when a Fugencio Batista is in power. And at the same time I see that the pandemic forces me to continue riding my suitcase like Don Quixote, while wielding useless lances against a government that confronts me in the form of a fascist windmill, persecuting its enemies with denunciation lists – the standard fare of a dictatorship.

As much as I lead an island existence in social isolation, I do need the proximity of at least one other island. This island has a 91-year-old mother, my mother-in-law, who needs a caregiver. A very old woman who is forced to witness how the highest representative of the nation doesn't give a damn about her life. I spend Christmas and New Year's Eve 2020/21 alone, simmering in my hatred for the president who has turned Brazil, a country that once elicited worldwide sympathy, into an international disgrace, a pariah in the community of nations, a backward rogue state that inspires disgust and hatred.

The Sufis have a proverb that in the desert there is no sign that says "thou shalt not eat stones". Meanwhile, in the Brazil of Bolsonarism, many have learned to eat shit. Some even say that it tastes good. The story is still far from over. The longing to leave the country is great.



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Marcelo Backes, born in 1973, is a writer, translator, and private lecturer based in Rio de Janeiro. In addition to four novels and several volumes of essays, he has translated works by Goethe, Schiller, Heine; Schnitzler, Kafka, Broch, and Musil; Christoph Ransmayr and Ingo Schulze into Portuguese. In 2015, he received the Austrian State Prize for Literary Translation

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Veröffentlichungsdatum: 18.12.2020

Stand: 20.04.2024

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