

# A Lamp Shop in Sao Paolo



Rain in Sao Paulo, Brazil, is like rain in the Philippines. The sky darkens. The heat becomes intense. There is a flash of lightning, a clap of thunder. And then, the heavens fall and there is a deluge. The rain comes down with sudden fury, driven by wind. In a few minutes, the streets become rivers.

It was in that kind of a rainstorm that I had to get off a bus in Sao Paulo. I jumped to the sidewalk and sprinted to the nearest open shop and there took shelter until the rain subsided.

It happened to be a shop that specialized in electric lamps. Every kind of lamp and every shape and size of lampshade was there; large and small, ceiling lamps, wall lamps, desk lamps. They were in every kind of style and design: round, flat, rectangular, globular. Some were shaped like gourds; others like inverted kettles. Some were genuine antiques, relics of a pre-electric age when lamps had to burn kerosene or oil; others were ultramodern creations. Some were single units; others were clusters; chandeliers; sunbursts.

Plato or Aristotle or Saint Thomas or any of the great philosophers would have found himself entertained in such a shop, for it afforded plenty of matter for reflection. For example, the myriad lamps in the shop were a good example of unity amid variety, of what is essential and what is accidental. For underneath the variety of size, shape, color and design, the lamps had one thing in common: they were all lamps; their essential function was to furnish lights.

How instructive this could have been (I thought, as I looked out upon the pouring rain outside) how instructive to the bureaucrats at home! There is a tendency in minds of limited scope to demand uniformity. Uniformity, you see, makes for neatness, and some people like things neat and tidy — like the librarian of fable who is said to have put all the red-covered books in one shelf and all the blue-covered

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ones in another. That library must really have looked neat: but could anyone use it?

Government bureaucracy likes to impose uniformity in education: all pupils must study the same things; all schools must have the same curriculum. But why should a rural school in the remote mountains, where the pupils are preparing to be farmers, have exactly the same curriculum as those in the cities where people are preparing for something else?

Even Church officials sometimes succumb to the easy lure of uniformity. A classic example is the famous controversy on the Chinese Rites. The Jesuit missionaries of the 17th century in China tried to adapt the Christian liturgy to Chinese customs and the Chinese language; but the ecclesiastical diehards and the bureaucrats demanded that the Chinese must do exactly what the Italians and the Spaniards did. Result: the expulsion of the missionaries and the closing of China to the Christian Gospel.

It is easy to demand uniformity; it takes a greater degree of intelligence and imagination to seek not uniformity but unity amid variety. One of the accomplishments of the Second Vatican Council was precisely tills; it gave recognition to the fact that unity and uniformity are not necessarily synonymous, and that essential unity is possible in a plurality of forms.

Lamps. All sizes and shapes, a total absence of uniformity in design, yet all with one uniform function; to give light. And yet, even the accidental differences can be important. Size and shape and design can be of crucial moment. Certain types of lamp might grace a parlor but would be out of place in a kitchen or a garage. Those magnificent chandeliers in the reception hall of Malacañang would be inappropriate in a nipa hut.

Like clothes. The essential function of clothes is to cover the body decently and to keep it warm. But not every type of garment would be appropriate everywhere. Bathing suits might be all right in the beaches of Rio de Janeiro or Nasugbu; would they be proper in the Manila Cathedral or in St. Peter's in Rome?

One of the requirements of civilized living is that we should know what is proper, what is appropriate. The proper things the proper conduct; the acceptable dress; the suitable decoration; the proper time and place. When Europeans use the term "vulgar," they usually

mean someone (or something) that indulges in the unsuitable. On the other hand, someone is said to have “good taste” who invariably chooses what is appropriate.

One of the objectives of education is to learn how to discern what is proper. Isn't it ironic that some of the most outlandish examples of what is inappropriate or improper can be found in the very institutions of learning which are supposed to impart knowledge? like inappropriate conduct; or inappropriate dress; or inappropriate buildings; or inappropriate curricula.

These thoughts were interrupted when someone came into the shop. The rain had stopped. Customers were beginning to come in. I smiled at the shopkeeper and thanked him for allowing me to take shelter in his shop. I looked around once more at the wide variety of lamps. Then I went out into the wet streets of Sao Paulo.



## The Alabama Experiment



One of the most revolting revelations made after the second world war was the manner in which the Germans had treated their Jewish prisoners in the concentration camps. The prisoners were herded into large ovens which were then sealed and filled with lethal gas. Prior to their death some of the prisoners had been subjected to scientific experiments, to test the effect of certain drugs upon the human body. And even after their death they were not always left alone; their skins were peeled off and tanned like animal hide. These were then manufactured into lampshades and other artifacts.

If the Nazis had ever been asked how they could have had the heart to do these things to fellow human beings, they would have answered with brutal simplicity: “They were Jews.”

Something like that, although on a much smaller scale, has been happening in the United States in what might be called the Alabama experiments. If the revelations made sometime ago in American newspapers were accurate, the experiment was as follows.

In 1932 the United States Public Health Service started an experiment in the town of Tuskegee, Alabama. Six hundred Blacks were recruited for the purpose, of whom one third (200) showed no symptoms of syphilis, while the other two thirds (400) were definitely syphilitic. Of this latter group, 200 were treated for the disease; the remaining 200 syphilitics received no treatments. They could be treated for other ailments, but not for syphilis. That particular disease was to be allowed to run unchecked.

To insure "voluntary" cooperation with this experiment, the participants were promised "free transportation to and from hospitals, free hot lunches, free medical treatment for ailments other than syphilis, and free burials." The "free burial" was important, because the real objective of the experiment could not be attained until the person was dead. At his death an autopsy would be conducted to examine the nature and extent of damage to the human body caused by syphilis. It was therefore essential to the experiment that the disease should be allowed to develop unchecked.

In other words, 200 persons were allowed to rot, so that their corpses could be examined by scientists to determine the kind and extent of the rotting.

In the meantime penicillin had been discovered to be an effective antidote to syphilis, at least in some cases. An application of penicillin might perhaps have cured some, if not all, of the two hundred syphilitic patients who had until then not been treated at all. But their cure would have spoiled the experiments. For that experiment to succeed, it was essential that they should remain syphilitic until death, so that their corpses could be scientifically examined.

By 1972 (forty years after the start of the experiment) there were 74 of these unfortunates still alive. The rest had died.

When these facts became known to the public, an outraged nation (for the American people are for the most part decent) protested against it. But by that time, the 74 survivors were considered "too old" to be treated for their disease. They were doomed to die syphilitics. Such was the Alabama experiments.

We have not yet gone back to the orgies of pagan Rome, where human beings were killed in the arena to amuse the multitude. We have advanced beyond that. Human beings are now treated like laboratory mice; like guinea-pigs. They are allowed to rot; and even

where medicines are available, they are prevented-from getting any medical treatments All for the advancement of scientific knowledge: so that the tax-supported Public Health Service could give to the American public — and to the rest of the world — more accurate information regarding the effects of syphilis.

If it is sickening to learn of the details of this experiment, it is even more revolting to hear the explanations How could scientists have allowed such an experiment to be perpetrated upon fellow human beings? The answer given was devastatingly simple: “They were Blacks.” ↪