

Introduction

Legitimizing an Authoritarian Regime—Brazil

The Brazilian Regime

During the 1960s and 1970s, in the midst of the Cold War, authoritarian regimes seized power throughout most of Latin America. While the case of the former Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, who narrowly escaped prosecution, is legendary, by contrast few people are familiar with the military regime in Brazil.¹ The authoritarian government in Brazil ruled between 1964 and 1985, making it one of the longest-lasting military regimes in the southern cone. While the process of transitioning to democracy was “negotiated,” as in most Latin American countries (except in Argentina, where the regime collapsed), the unique aspect of the Brazilian transition was its lengthy and gradual process of political opening, initiated by military president Ernesto Geisel (1974–1979).² Geisel instigated the so-called *distensão* (literally “depressurization”),³ which led to a marked reduction in human-rights crimes prior to the regime’s demise. The Brazilian people played a crucial part in the transition process, because large sectors of the population mobilized in support of a return to democracy from 1975 onward. While much of the literature continues to assert that this novel military policy was primarily driven “from above,”⁴ other scholars have claimed that it was largely demanded “from below,” as the regime’s popularity declined in the 1970s.⁵ As summarized by Alfred P. Montero, the transition entailed a mixture of government-initiated gradual opening and control and popular mobilization in the form of the so-called Brazilian amnesty movement.⁶

Arguably the most important distinguishing characteristic of the authoritarian regime in Brazil was its fundamentally ambiguous character, which fluctuated between authoritarian principles and democratic pretense.⁷ Although the regime was not democratic, it made a great effort to create the appearance of a democracy and to avoid comparisons with a dictatorship. Democratic institutions and procedures were maintained but in a distorted form. The traditional

legal system remained, but it was overlaid by an arbitrary “revolutionary” legal system composed of institutional acts.

The regime justified these additional decrees by referring to a diffuse notion of “national security.”⁸ During the Cold War, national security provided a common and convenient argument for many states to justify authoritarian decrees. They claimed that the threat of communism would jeopardize national security, even though this threat was often spurious and merely used as a pretext for increasing state control. In authoritarian Brazil, Congress continued to sit but was closed when it disobeyed the regime’s orders.⁹ Indirect elections to Congress were manipulated, yet they continued to be held, unlike in authoritarian Chile (1973–1990) or Argentina (1976–1983). The military regime in Brazil used the word *democracy* as a synonym for *anticommunist state*, rather than to mean a representative system that protected people’s rights.

The illegal regime used various methods to maintain its grip on power. It suspended the political rights of its opponents for ten years (*cassações*), forced dis-senting civil servants and military officials to retire, and, most importantly, used political repression in the form of exile, prison, torture, murder, and disappearance. According to the first official report by the Brazilian government in 2007, the estimated overall number of dead and disappeared in military Brazil is relatively low, at a total of 474. Compare this with Argentina, where estimates are in the region of 20,000–30,000, and Chile, which saw between 3,000 and 5,000 assassinations.¹⁰ This first figure, however, is currently subject to revision; the number of victims may increase in the final report of the Brazilian Truth Commission, expected in 2014.¹¹ Yet despite this much smaller number of victims and the fact that repression in Brazil was largely selective (at least to our current knowledge), affecting primarily left-wing groups who opposed the regime, we must not forget that torture nonetheless became a systematic state procedure from 1969/70 onward. Vladimir Safatle and Edson Teles have furthermore argued that the Brazilian dictatorship’s death toll was much higher, because it created long-term structures of violence, in the form of police repression and death squads, which increased homicide rates after formal democratization.¹²

Brazilians had experienced torture before, but it was the installation, in 1969/70, of notorious repressive organs—the so-called Center of Internal Defense Operations–Detachment of Intelligence Operations (Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna–Destacamento de Operações de Informações, CODI-DOI)—that institutionalized human-rights violations. In July 1969, the so-called Operation Bandeirantes (OBAN) was installed, which was financed by São Paulo and international businesses and already staffed by the

armed forces and local police units. The CODI-DOI institutionalized and expanded the repressive structures of the OBAN on the basis of a secret decree-law passed by the National Security Council.¹³ In the literature it is also called DOI-CODI; however, as technically the DOI was under the CODI, this book uses the formally more correct term CODI-DOI.¹⁴ Yet the military regime did not maintain power by force alone but employed more subtle mechanisms for manufacturing consent; these less obvious strategies to control society and legitimize forms of illegal rule have been overlooked.¹⁵ Investigating the official propaganda of authoritarian Brazil tells us how the regime tried to justify its rule and thus provides hints about the true nature of the regime.

The propaganda of authoritarian Brazil also had a long-term effect. Just as there has been much political and legal continuity from authoritarianism to democracy in post-1985 Brazil, vital motives and justifications for authoritarian propaganda still shape the struggle over how Brazilians remember the dictatorship. Analyzing the regime's official propaganda helps us to discover and deconstruct the remnants of authoritarian propaganda in present-day Brazil.

Although, in 1995, the Brazilian state officially assumed responsibility for the victims of this systematic repression, to this day no post-1985 civilian government has prosecuted any military officials implicated in those human-rights violations. The perpetrators were granted full amnesty by the Amnesty Law of 1979, which has never been revoked. In 2008, the Brazilian Lawyers Association (OAB) appealed to the Supreme Court to investigate whether the Amnesty Law was constitutional, but their request was rejected in April 2010.¹⁶ Six months later, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) ruled that the Brazilian Amnesty Law violated international human-rights law, leading to an open confrontation between Brazil and the international human-rights community.¹⁷ In most other Latin American countries, officials from the repressive organs have been punished, or prosecutions are ongoing. In Brazil, Colonel Brilhante Ustra alone, head of the CODI-DOI in São Paulo between 1970 and 1974, was symbolically tried in 2007 and “morally” condemned for torture in August 2012. In December 2009, the Brazilian Human Rights Minister, Paulo Vannuchi, suggested creating a National Truth Commission to clarify cases of human-rights crimes, but even this non-retributive proposal met with resistance and led to a government crisis.¹⁸ In May 2012, twenty-seven years after the return to formal democracy, a so-called National Truth Commission (Comissão Nacional da Verdade) was instated to shed light on the human-rights abuses committed by agents of the state.

Another key characteristic of the regime in Brazil that is crucial to understanding the authoritarian propaganda that it generated is its internal division into different military camps.¹⁹ Propaganda production constituted a contested field, a battle zone between the “hardliners” (*linha dura*) and “moderates,” sometimes also called “softliners” or “Sorbonne.” These terms are applicable to both military officers and civilians, and they represent a highly problematic heuristic categorization, but it is the only one currently available.²⁰ The term “hardliner” denotes those who supported violent repression and favored the continuation of military rule.²¹ Hardliners demanded that opponents of the regime be tortured or even killed. They believed that Brazil was engaged in a kind of civil war and that the regime needed to eliminate alleged communists by any means available for the sake of national security. Although hardliners did not believe in the principles underlying liberal democracy, they nonetheless used its rhetoric.²² The label “moderates” is applied to people who were also authoritarian but rejected repression “in principle,” justifying it only in exceptional cases.²³ Moderates furthermore regarded military rule as a transitional phase, with their ultimate goal being the handing over of power to civilians. Anne-Marie Smith has rightly pointed out that the so-called moderates were defined as such only in contrast to the hardliners, not because of their benevolence.²⁴

Although the classifications of moderates and hardliners are very general, they are nonetheless useful for describing the friction that occurred between the appointed propaganda officials who belonged to the moderate camp and their hardliner antagonists. Only insiders would know that the arena of propaganda production constituted a highly contested field, because the authoritarian regime tried to portray itself as united and to prevent any information about inner conflicts from reaching the Brazilian public. The official authoritarian propaganda also served as an instrument for concealing problems within the regime.

The Coup

On March 31, 1964, General Olímpio Mourão Filho, commander of the fourth military region in Juiz de Fora, in the state of Minas Gerais, launched a coup against the legally elected president, João Goulart, and forced him into exile. While numerous military officers rejected supporting the coup and later faced repression, those military officials involved called this act a revolution—a euphemistic and politically biased term that is still prevalent among supporters

of the regime in modern-day Brazil.²⁵ The new military government started to arrest, forcibly retire, and dismiss from their jobs thousands of Brazilian citizens. Although many left-wing military officers, who supported Goulart, along with university students, intellectuals, and labor officials, disapproved of the coup, no substantial opposition arose. On the contrary, sectors of the upper and middle classes took to the streets of Rio de Janeiro to celebrate the military intervention. Most people therefore prefer to think of it as a civilian-military, rather than a strictly military, coup.²⁶ The term “civilian-military coup,” however, is also problematic, because it has been used by revisionists who defend the dictatorship, arguing that it was “called for” by the Brazilian people.

The seizure of power had numerous causes.²⁷ Brazil was confronted with a combination of economic, fiscal, and political crises, namely huge foreign debts, hyperinflation, and, most importantly, an increasingly mobilized labor movement. President Goulart had gradually moved further to the left and promised major reforms, including a historic land reform and the nationalization of private oil companies, thus undermining the benefits enjoyed by large parts of the upper and middle classes.²⁸

The Ideological Roots of the Regime’s Propaganda

The rhetoric and arguments of the regime’s propaganda were rooted in traditional Brazilian authoritarian thought, the National Security Doctrine (NSD) developed by the Superior War School (ESG), and developmentalist ideas, particularly those of the Superior Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB).²⁹ The Superior War School was a civilian-military think tank that, during the early 1960s, gained formal power among the military.³⁰ It provided the “revolution’s” key ideology, the National Security Doctrine, and functioned as a “network of influence,” since many civilian and military leaders were ESG graduates.³¹ The ESG came under the direct influence of the U.S. War College.³² The NSD originally evolved after the military dismantled the empire in 1889. Since then, the military had clung to the belief that it should be in charge for the good of the Brazilian nation.³³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, the NSD held that the army was the only force capable of overcoming regional differences and solving the nation’s problems.

In the context of the Cold War, the ESG refined the NSD; the major innovation was that it now insisted upon the constant threat from “internal enemies,” which laid the basis for an arbitrary system of power and repression. Much like McCarthy’s anticommunist witch hunt in the United States, which made all

citizens vulnerable to scrutiny, every Brazilian citizen was considered a potential communist and thus a threat to the nation. The new role of the military was no longer to “moderate,” nor to resist, an external invasion, but to defy these potential enemies that were believed to be capable of psychologically infiltrating the minds of Brazilians.³⁴

Brazil was not an exceptional case. In the context of the Cold War, theories of “total war,” which highlighted “internal threats,” achieved prominence throughout the whole of Latin America. Labor movements were regarded as “communist subversions.” It was believed that in underdeveloped countries more workers would be seduced by communism than in industrialized nations. The Brazilian version of the Security Doctrine contained some insoluble contradictions. The process of aligning with the “Occident” and “democracy” was incompatible with the construction of the ubiquitous internal enemy, which had to be combatted with authoritarian means. Justifying the creation of this security system depended on the construction of an internal enemy, even if none existed.³⁵ The discrepancy between democratic rhetoric and oppressive reality led to a permanent legitimacy crisis, or to what Lucia Klein has termed “emptiness of legitimacy,” which propaganda and censorship attempted to fill.³⁶ Its profession of adherence to democracy limited the regime’s totalitarian actions. Smith has phrased this concisely, stating that the regime was “constrained by a notably ambivalent yet continuous search for legitimacy.”³⁷

The second main principle espoused by the NSD was that national security depended on development that was regarded as the ideal antidote to communism.³⁸ Improving living standards was not a by-product but a strategic goal.³⁹ According to the ESG’s key ideologist, Golbery da Silva Couto, the nation’s well-being had to be sacrificed for security if necessary. Development theories were partly provided by the ISEB—the think tank of developmentalists between 1954 and 1964. Different ideological streams coexisted among *isebianos*, but core aspects recurred in the regime’s propaganda, such as the abolition of class distinctions, social pacification, the goal of national unity, and the realization of the “common good” in order to overcome political, cultural, and economic underdevelopment.⁴⁰ The required development was to be led by the state. Other ideas borrowed from the ideology of “developmentism,” which was prominent under Juscelino Kubitschek’s presidency (1955–1960), were the goals of prosperity, peace, and sovereignty; the emphasis on “order and security” to safeguard development; the highlighting of the democratic and Christian traditions; anticommunism; nationalism; and the belief in “national grandeur” as Brazil’s destiny (*Brasil Grande*).